



Refugee Council of Australia

REVIEW OF THE HUMANITARIAN SETTLEMENT SERVICES AND COMPLEX CASE SUPPORT PROGRAMS

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the national umbrella body for refugees, asylum seekers and the organisations and individuals who work with them, representing 200 organisations and more than 900 individual members. RCOA promotes the adoption of humane, lawful and constructive policies by governments and communities in Australia and internationally towards refugees, asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants. RCOA consults regularly with its members, community leaders and people from refugee backgrounds and this submission is informed by their views.

RCOA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the review of the Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) and Complex Case Support (CCS) programs. Australia's settlement services framework is renowned internationally as an example of best practice in supporting the successful settlement of refugee and humanitarian entrants. At the same time, however, there are a range of emerging and ongoing challenges faced by HSS providers and the people with whom they work. This submission aims both to highlight these challenges and suggest strategies to address them.

1. The importance of on-arrival support

- 1.1. The initial months of settlement in Australia is one of the most challenging periods in a refugee's settlement journey. Refugee and humanitarian entrants typically arrive in Australia with limited or no financial resources (with some new arrivals bringing literally nothing more than the clothes on their backs), English language skills or knowledge of Australian culture, laws and systems. On arrival, they are confronted with myriad and often competing settlement challenges: finding appropriate accommodation, learning English, completing education, obtaining or upgrading qualifications, seeking employment, supporting family members still living in refugee situations overseas, learning about life in Australia and recovering from experiences of torture and trauma.
- 1.2. In this context, effective on-arrival support plays a critical role in assisting new arrivals to find a foothold in Australia and begin their settlement journey in a positive way. HSS providers are the first point of contact in Australia for many new arrivals in Australia and the support they offer can have a significant influence on future settlement outcomes.
- 1.3. Feedback received by RCOA about the HSS program from both providers and people from refugee backgrounds has been mostly positive, with HSS seen as a program which serves an important purpose and is relevant to the needs of refugee and humanitarian entrants. RCOA therefore encourages the Australian Government to maintain sufficient funding for the HSS and CCS programs to ensure that they can continue to play an important role in supporting new arrivals. At the same time, however, RCOA has identified a number of issues and challenges faced by both HSS providers themselves and the people with whom they work. These are outlined in further detail in the following sections.

2. Fluctuations in settlement patterns

- 2.1. Recent years have seen numerous and often sudden changes to Australia's refugee and asylum seeker policy which have in turn resulted in dramatic fluctuations in settlement patterns across the country. This has created significant challenges for settlement service providers, in particular those providing on-arrival support. Changes in the size of the Refugee and Humanitarian

Sydney office:

Suite 4A6, 410 Elizabeth Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010 Australia
Phone: (02) 9211 9333 • Fax: (02) 9211 9288
admin@refugeecouncil.org.au

Web: www.refugeecouncil.org.au • Twitter: @OzRefugeeCounc

Melbourne office:

Level 2, 313-315 Flinders Lane
Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia
Phone: (03) 9600 3302
melbourne@refugeecouncil.org.au

Incorporated in ACT • ABN 87 956 673 083

Program and the length of time taken to process asylum claims has resulted in feast-or-famine settlement patterns in some areas, with sharp peaks and troughs in demand for services. Some services have reported that they have struggled to survive financially or have to significantly reduce their staff numbers due to arrivals being lower than expected. Others have struggled to respond to rapid increases in arrivals, being left without sufficient time for advance planning.

- 2.2. The changing composition of the Refugee and Humanitarian Program has also affected settlement patterns. Over the past two years, there has been a significant increase in the number of people arriving in Australia under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP), from 503 in 2012-13 to 4,515 in 2013-14. SHP visa holders are sponsored by a “proposer” in Australia – either an individual (usually a relative) or organisation – who is expected to provide on-arrival support in place of HSS. As such, SHP visa holders are not automatically eligible for HSS, although they can receive HSS services on a needs basis if their proposer is unable to provide adequate support.
- 2.3. Because SHP visa holders need to settle close to their proposer, they are generally more likely to settle in established (especially metropolitan) settlement areas. Recent feedback gathered from service providers in Australia suggests that the increase in SHP visa grants has resulted in a larger proportion of refugee and humanitarian entrants arriving in these established areas at the expense of smaller or emerging settlement areas.
- 2.4. Concern has also been expressed that the increased emphasis on SHP visa grants has delayed the arrival of people resettled through the Refugee component of Australia’s resettlement program, under which refugees are referred to Australia by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Service providers in some regional areas have reported being informed at the beginning of the financial year that they would receive a specific number of UNHCR-referred clients but no clients have yet arrived. As HSS funding is based on a fee-for-service model, these providers cannot continue to maintain existing staffing levels while waiting for clients (and thus funding) to arrive. When the clients allocated to these service providers eventually arrive, however, the providers will be faced with the challenge of recruiting or rehiring additional staff at a time when demand for services is high.
- 2.5. Fluctuations in settlement patterns have been a significant source of frustration for many providers in recent years. The impacts have been felt most keenly by smaller providers which have less capacity to adapt to large increases and decreases in arrival numbers. There is also concern that these fluctuations may result in the loss of significant expertise and organisational memory as providers are forced to let go of skilled staff in order to survive financially. To ensure that settlement programs can remain viable (particularly in smaller settlement areas), service providers have called for more consistency in arrival numbers across the year.

Recommendation 1

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government seek to ensure greater consistency in settlement patterns to ensure that quality on-arrival support services can be maintained across Australia.

3. Regional settlement

- 3.1. As noted in Section 2, service providers in regional areas tend to be among those most significantly affected by fluctuations in settlement patterns. As well as presenting a challenge for these providers, it also represents a lost opportunity. RCOA has received clear and consistent feedback highlighting the willingness and capacity for greater settlement in regional Australia. In RCOA’s annual consultations on the Refugee and Humanitarian Program last year, consultation participants in many regional centres – including Albany, Armidale, Ballarat, Bathurst, Bega, Cairns, Coffs Harbour, Colac, Camperdown, Geelong, Hobart, Launceston, Mildura, Newcastle, Rockhampton, Shepparton, Wagga Wagga and Wollongong – all called for more referrals to be made to regional centres. Many regions which were involved in the Regional Humanitarian Settlement Pilots have been successfully set up to receive new arrivals, yet have had to close their services due to the low number of humanitarian settlements in those regions.

- 3.2. At the same time, however, service providers in regional areas consistently emphasise the importance of ensuring that there is adequate support available both to ensure that new arrivals receive the assistance they need and to ensure that the local community is adequately equipped to meet these needs. Service providers have highlighted the need for more work on building place-based models of regional settlement. Good collaborative planning between Federal, State and local governments is required to identify potential regional settlement locations and ensure communities are prepared and adequate settlement, employment, education and health services are provided. It was also suggested that regional settlement is more successful when consideration is given to settling a critical mass of families from a particular cultural background to create viable local community support.
- 3.3. One HSS provider consulted by RCOA noted that it had achieved positive regional settlement outcomes through an “employment-led secondary settlement process”, whereby refugee and humanitarian entrants initially settled in a metropolitan area received support and advice to pursue employment opportunities in regional areas, with relocation assistance provided by Job Services Australia. This model was seen as advantageous in that it allowed for a thorough needs assessment and intensive on-arrival support to be provided before relocation to a regional area, assisted new arrivals to make informed choices about future settlement opportunities and ensured that clients were able to access relocation assistance (for which they may not yet be eligible immediately after arrival due to not having yet been referred to a Job Services Australia provider).

Recommendation 2

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government develop a new regional settlement strategy, assessing potential and established regional areas as settlement locations, working with regional providers to plan and prepare for new humanitarian settlers, and ensuring sufficient numbers of referrals are made within each intake year to retain capacity and momentum in regional settlement locations.

4. Restrictions on eligibility for HSS

- 4.1. As a result of changes introduced in August 2013, Protection Visa holders (except for unaccompanied minors) who had lived in the Australian community prior to their visa grant, either on short-term Bridging Visas or in community detention, are not eligible for the HSS program. This change was based on the assumption that people who had already been living in the Australian community would not require the same kinds of on-arrival support and orientation assistance as people who have been resettled from overseas or recently released from detention.
- 4.2. Some of the people affected by this change may indeed be in a position where they do not require the full suite of settlement services. For example, people who have been living in the community for a significant period of time may already be living in sustainable long-term accommodation, own basic household goods and be familiar with services in their local area. RCOA is concerned, however, that the blanket application of this policy may exclude people who are in genuine need of HSS support.
- 4.3. There are currently very few Government-funded support programs available to asylum seekers living on Bridging Visas, none of which are comparable to the HSS. Asylum seekers who are released from detention receive transition support for six weeks (with feedback from service providers indicating that much of this time is spent securing accommodation), after which time the vast majority are eligible only for limited income support and very basic casework assistance. Asylum seekers who arrive on valid visas and are not subject to detention receive no Government-funded orientation assistance whatsoever unless they are particularly vulnerable and many are not eligible for any kind of Government-funded casework or income support. Some non-government organisations provide a range of services to asylum seekers which endeavour to fill these gaps but they are unable to meet the needs of all asylum seekers living in the community.

- 4.4. As such, many asylum seekers living in the community receive very little or no orientation and casework assistance. Due to their low incomes, temporary status and limited access to support services, many face significant ongoing difficulties in navigating life in Australia. RCOA receives consistent reports of asylum seekers in the community facing poverty, homelessness or housing stress, marginalisation and significant physical and mental health issues.
- 4.5. While asylum seekers living in community detention receive more intensive support than people living in the community on Bridging Visas, they do not have the same level of independence: reporting requirements are more stringent, freedom of movement is more restricted and some key services (such as accommodation and health care) are supplied by contracted service providers rather than having to be sought by asylum seekers themselves. As such, people in community detention have less experience in navigating Australian services and systems than would be the case for asylum seekers on Bridging Visas. Furthermore, people are usually placed in community detention because they are particularly vulnerable or have complex needs and may not have the capacity to live independently without settlement support.
- 4.6. Due to the issues outlined above, some asylum seekers who are recognised as refugees – even if they have been living in the community for a considerable period of time – may be highly vulnerable and in need of significant support to rebuild their lives. Excluding these people from the HSS program without considering their individual needs could prevent some refugee and humanitarian entrants from receiving the assistance they need to settle successfully in Australia.
- 4.7. Furthermore, the experience of asylum seekers living in the Australian community is fundamentally different to that of people who have been recognised as refugees. Because their claims are still being processed, their future in Australia is uncertain and some will eventually be found not to be refugees and expected to return to their country of origin. As such, the support services available to asylum seekers focus on assisting people to subsist rather than to settle as not all will become long-term residents of Australia. By contrast, people recognised as refugees do become long-term residents and the services designed to assist them (including the HSS program) focus not merely on subsistence but on settlement: they aim to support refugee and humanitarian entrants to build a new life and plan for their future in Australia. RCOA therefore believes that it is misguided to assume that people who have been living in the Australian community would be embarking on their settlement journey from the same position as a person who had received services under the HSS program.
- 4.8. At the time of writing, legislation was before the Australian Parliament which sought to reintroduce Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) for refugees who arrived in Australia as asylum seekers without a valid visa. Unlike permanent Protection Visa holders, TPV holders will not be eligible for the HSS program. Aside from the short-term transition support provided to people who are released from closed and community detention, TPV holders will not receive settlement or orientation support during their initial period of settlement in Australia. TPV holders are also ineligible for the Adult Migrant English Program and it appears that they may not have access to longer-term settlement services provided under the Settlement Grants program (although this is still unclear). RCOA is thus greatly concerned that TPV holders will not receive any targeted settlement support to assist them in establishing a new life in Australia. Research conducted during Australia's previous TPV regime¹ found that the denial of settlement support had a significant impact on the capacity of TPV holders to settle successfully, preventing them from actively participating in the Australian community and condemning them to a life of dependence.
- 4.9. Finally, RCOA notes that restrictions on access to family reunion under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program and the overwhelming demand for SHP visas has resulted in an increasing number of former refugees seeking to sponsor family members under the family stream of the general migration program. As a result, some refugee and humanitarian entrants arriving in Australia hold family visas which do not entitle them to access the HSS program – despite the fact that their needs may be very similar to those of people arriving on humanitarian visas.

¹ See RCOA's 2013 policy brief on Temporary Protection Visas http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/pb/PB1324_TPVs.pdf

- 4.10. It is RCOA's view that HSS services should be available to all people from refugee backgrounds, regardless of their mode of arrival in Australia, the visa they hold or whether they have been living in the Australian community. While some of the people in the categories described above may not require the full suite of HSS services, we believe this should be assessed on an individual basis to ensure that all refugee and humanitarian entrants receive the support they need to ensure a positive start to their settlement journey.

Recommendation 3

RCOA recommends that all Protection Visa and Temporary Protection Visa holders be granted access to the HSS program on a needs basis.

Recommendation 4

RCOA recommends that relatives of refugee and humanitarian visa holders arriving on family visas be granted access the HSS program on a needs basis.

5. SHP visa holders and access to HSS

- 5.1. As noted in Section 2, people resettled on SHP visas are not automatically eligible for the HSS program. While they can access HSS services if their proposer is unable to provide support, they are not automatically referred to a HSS provider but must instead apply for support. There is significant concern that SHP visa holders and their proposers may be reluctant to approach HSS providers for fear of being penalised for accessing these services. For example, service providers have reported that some proposers are concerned that approaching HSS services for help will jeopardise their ability to propose other people for resettlement in the future.
- 5.2. There is also concern that some proposers (whether they be individuals, organisations or community groups) may lack the necessary knowledge and expertise to provide orientation assistance commensurate with the professional, specialised support offered by HSS providers. Many proposers have themselves arrived in Australia relatively recently and may not be in a position to offer the kinds of support and guidance needed on arrival. For example, supporting new arrivals to secure appropriate long-term housing requires a sound understanding of the Australian rental systems and tenancy rights and responsibilities, as well as negotiation, advocacy and communication skills which proposers may still be in the process of developing. In some cases, proposers may offer incorrect or misleading advice which can negatively impact on the settlement process and experience.
- 5.3. As with former asylum seekers, lack of access to adequate on-arrival support could compromise the long-term settlement outcomes of SHP visa holders. This is of particular concern given that SHP visa holders are now arriving in far larger numbers than has been the case in recent years. Indeed, some refugee and humanitarian entrants have reported facing increasing pressure from the Department of Immigration and Border Protection to consider proposing family members for resettlement under the SHP rather than waiting for them to be resettled through the UNHCR-referred component of the resettlement program. Some have expressed fears that their family members may miss out on the opportunity to resettle in Australia unless they are proposed under the SHP and feel compelled to act as a proposer even if they have limited capacity to provide the requisite on-arrival support.
- 5.4. Some service providers and community members have also expressed concern that the increase in SHP arrivals is a cost-cutting measure designed to shift responsibility for providing on-arrival support from funded service providers to individuals and community groups. Cost-cutting in the short-term, however, could result in significant costs over the long-term if SHP visa holders do not receive the support they need to settle successfully.

Recommendation 5

RCOA recommends that all Special Humanitarian Program visa holders receive routine needs assessments during the initial period of settlement to ensure that they are receiving adequate on-arrival support.

6. The need for flexibility in the HSS eligibility period

- 6.1. RCOA has continually emphasised the need for an individual and needs-based approach to assessing eligibility for settlement support, rather than eligibility being limited to specific time periods. Refugee and humanitarian entrants come from a range of backgrounds and their education experiences, English fluency, mental and physical health needs and family and social connections can vary markedly. As such, some new arrivals may need only limited settlement support, while other may need much greater assistance. In this light, RCOA advocates the removal of the 12-month eligibility restriction for the HSS program, to be replaced with a needs-based assessment model which would allow additional support after 12 months if required.
- 6.2. In relation to the CCS program, RCOA emphasises that some arrivals (particularly those with complex needs) may need further support beyond the five-year eligibility period. This includes women who have been resettled under the Women at Risk program, unaccompanied minors, elderly people and people with complex physical or mental health issues. For some of these people, issues which may lead to their need for CCS support may not arise until a number of years after arrival in Australia. For example, the negative impacts of trauma may not emerge until years after the original traumatic event. While CCS services may be available after the five-year eligibility period in some exceptional circumstances, we believe that it would be more constructive to remove the time limit in favour of a needs-based assessment model. Given that people accessing the CCS program are often highly vulnerable and may require urgent and intensive support, RCOA believes that eligibility for the program should be determined by individual needs rather than an arbitrary time limit.

Recommendation 6

RCOA recommends that the current time-limited eligibility periods for the HSS and CCS program be replaced with an individualised needs-assessment process.

7. Support for young people

- 7.1. As a group, refugee and humanitarian entrants tend to be younger than the general Australian population. Between 2009-10 and 2013-14, of the approximately 70,000 people who were granted humanitarian visas, 87% were under the age of 35 when they arrived in Australia.
- 7.2. Young people from refugee backgrounds face unique challenges in addition to those faced by refugee and humanitarian entrants generally. Specific issues that young people face include disrupted education, multiple family responsibilities (with young people often being the family member most fluent in English), financial responsibilities (including supporting family overseas), and transitioning from Intensive English programs to a wide range of education and employment pathways. In addition, young people are also dealing with a wide range of issues associated with adolescence, which are amplified for someone coming into a new culture from a refugee background.
- 7.3. Young people from humanitarian backgrounds have expressed dissatisfaction with the current HSS model, which does not address the specific needs and issues faced by young people. In particular, HSS caseworkers are often not trained to provide specialised support for young people and are responsible for supporting a range of age groups. This may result in service providers not referring clients to youth specific programs or opportunities in which young people may have an interest. Young people who are part of a family unit have also expressed concerns that while their parents receive support from an HSS caseworker, the specific needs of the young person are ignored. RCOA emphasises the need for youth specialised HSS workers who are experienced in working with young people to provide individual support that addresses the unique needs and challenges faced by young people from humanitarian backgrounds.
- 7.4. There is also a lack of consistency in approaches and programs to support young people who arrived as unaccompanied humanitarian minors (young people from refugee backgrounds below the age of 18 who do not have a parent or guardian in Australia). These young people face

particular challenges when they turn 18, as they are quickly transitioned from more intensive support to independent living despite not having family and support structures on which they can rely. RCOA believes there is a need for a more consistent and targeted approach to supporting this particularly vulnerable group of young people as they transition to more independent living.

- 7.5. Young people would also benefit significantly from having a peer community guide (much like the Community Guides discussed in Section 12) from their own cultural or language background, as well as from a similar age group. Peer guides can provide information specific to the needs of young people and support in accessing youth facilities and developing social connections with other young people. Young people have also expressed a keen desire to meet and socialise with other young Australians and programs that provide peer mentoring or social activities are highly recommended.

Recommendation 7

RCOA recommends that specialist youth worker positions be embedded in the HSS program to address the unique needs of young people from refugee backgrounds.

Recommendation 8

RCOA recommends that unaccompanied humanitarian minors who are turning 18 receive a comprehensive needs assessment and appropriate referrals to CCS or other forms of support as required.

Recommendation 9

RCOA recommends that HSS providers consider developing peer community guides programs to provide specialised settlement support to young people.

8. Support for refugee and humanitarian entrants with disabilities

- 8.1. As a result of changes to the health requirement for refugee and humanitarian entrants resettled from overseas, there has been an increase in the number of people with disabilities arriving in Australia under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program. While this policy change has been welcomed as a means of ensuring that people with disabilities (who are often at greater risk in refugee situations) have access to resettlement opportunities, it has also created new challenges for on-arrival service providers.
- 8.2. Service providers have reported that waiting periods for disability support services can be very long. For example, the waiting period for occupational therapist assessments (necessary to obtain certain types of aides and equipment) can extend to 14 months. While this issue affects all Australian residents with disabilities, it presents a particular challenge for people from refugee backgrounds because they generally arrive with very little and may have had to leave their aides and equipment behind.
- 8.3. In addition, unlike people who are born with or acquire a disability in Australia, people from refugee backgrounds who arrive with pre-existing disabilities have no service history in Australia. A person who is hospitalised after acquiring a disability in Australia, for example, would not be discharged until they had been provided with rehabilitation, seen an occupational therapist and been referred to relevant disability support services. This does not occur for people who acquired disabilities before arriving in Australia. As a result, they may have to wait for long periods before obtaining even basic equipment such as mobility aides.
- 8.4. Service providers have also reported that mainstream disability support services tend to be unfamiliar with the needs of people from refugee backgrounds and their entitlements to support. At the same time, some people from refugee backgrounds may not be familiar with services and equipment that in Australia are seen as basic necessities for people with disabilities and, as such, may not seek out support independently.

- 8.5. On-arrival settlement services, through offering referrals, brokerage and advocacy, can play a crucial role in ensuring that refugee and humanitarian entrants with disabilities receive the support that they need and that mainstream disability support services are equipped to meet these needs. RCOA notes, however, that the current model of on-arrival service provision does not adequately take into account the additional support needed to ensure positive settlement outcomes for refugee and humanitarian entrants with disabilities. We therefore recommend that measures to address the specific needs of this group be incorporated into the on-arrival service provision model.

Recommendation 10

RCOA recommends that additional support arrangements for refugee and humanitarian entrants with disabilities be embedded in the HSS and CCS programs.

9. Challenges relating to family size

- 9.1. Over a number of years, participants in RCOA's community consultations have raised concerns about the specific on-arrival settlement challenges faced by large families of six to ten members. These families often face particular difficulties in securing suitably-sized accommodation, with some forced to live across several different properties because they are unable to find a single property which is both affordable and large enough to accommodate the entire family. It has also been noted that the basic household goods package available through the HSS program is not adequately scaleable for larger families, in that standard-sized furniture and appliances may be too small for a large family.
- 9.2. At the other end of the scale, single people also face significant on-arrival challenges relating to accommodation and household goods. Due to the limited availability of affordable housing in many traditional settlement areas for refugee and humanitarian entrants, many single clients cannot afford to rent a property on their own and thus share accommodation with family, friends or other community members. Concerns have been raised that these shared arrangements can lead to significant housing insecurity. For example, many of these shared arrangements operate on an informal basis, placing those involved at risk of breaching their tenancy contracts. Additionally, many refugee and humanitarian entrants share accommodation with people they barely know or who they have known for only a short period of time (such as people they have met in detention) and may struggle to successfully negotiate shared arrangements. In relation to household goods, single people sharing accommodation may receive only one basic household goods package to share between them. If one member of the household moves out, they cannot take these shared goods with them and may struggle to afford new furniture and appliances of their own.
- 9.3. Given the additional challenges associated with supporting families of large families and single clients, RCOA recommends that there be further flexibility within the HSS program to ensure that providers are able deliver appropriately tailored support to these groups.

Recommendation 11

RCOA recommends that the HSS program include provisions for offering tailored support to large families and single clients.

10. Contractual arrangements

- 10.1. In RCOA's annual consultations this year, a number of service providers have highlighted their frustration with the short timeframes of their contracts. Without longer, more reliable funding agreements, service providers are unable to offer their staff ongoing or more reliable employment contracts. This means that highly skilled and experienced staff are forced to remain on short-term contracts and providers risk losing some of their most valued staff members. Delays in the finalisation of funding decisions or contracts can also result in the loss of experienced staff (as has occurred in the recent Settlement Grants funding round).

- 10.2. Service providers who are on longer-term contracts also face challenges in that there is no way to adjust the terms of the contract in light of fluctuations in arrival numbers. For example, a five-year contract may be based on a benchmark of 200 arrivals each years. If there are more arrivals than have been budgeted for, there may be no additional support for the service providers to increase staff to address this need. As such, service providers have recommended that top-up funding be available for providers on longer contracts who receive a greater number of clients than expected.
- 10.3. As noted in Section 2, contractual arrangements where service providers are funded per client also creates uncertainty and unreliability, especially when there is a delay in the number of new arrivals in certain regions. Rather than provide funding on a client based allocation, RCOA believes that the Australian Government should consider alternative options to create more reliability and stability for service providers when there may be a delay in the arrival of new clients.
- 10.4. Service providers have also reported that there is a great need to improve data collection and reporting systems in order to reduce duplication across Departmental and internal systems. These reporting requirements are time- and resource-intensive and thus increase costs and inefficiency. In this regard, service providers have welcomed the Government's approach to "cutting red tape" and its commitment to improving reporting facilities. RCOA recommends the Government work closely with service providers in developing the new reporting systems.
- 10.5. Some concerns have also been raised in relation to the size of HSS caseloads. RCOA has heard from a number of refuge community members that their HSS provider is often too busy to support them, as they have too many clients. This results in inefficiency, as the settlement process may be delayed by inadequate support. RCOA emphasises the need to ensure that caseloads are effective, efficient and manageable and advises that additional funding and other provisions be considered to ensure staff have sufficient time and resources to adequately support all of their clients.
- 10.6. Finally, RCOA is concerned by the increasingly competitive approach to funding settlement services. We believe that competitive tendering, in which service providers are forced to compete against each other, risks undermining the quality of services through compelling service providers to cut costs (and skilled staff) in order to win contracts. Such competitive approaches also discourage partnerships and information-sharing, both of which are often crucial to effective service provision. RCOA believes that the quality of service provision, assessed on the basis of the skills, experience and expertise of service providers, should be the primary consideration when awarding contracts. In particular, we note the importance of ensuring that contracted service providers have specific expertise and a proven track record in working with people from refugee backgrounds and a demonstrated understanding of the needs of communities settling in their local area. While quality tailored services may have a higher initial cost, they are also more effective and, therefore, more efficient over the long-term.

Recommendation 12

RCOA recommends that longer-term contracts be granted for on-arrival settlement services where possible.

Recommendation 13

RCOA recommends that the size of HSS caseloads be managed in a manner which ensures that providers have sufficient time and resources to adequately support all clients.

Recommendation 14

RCOA recommends that the current competitive tendering approach to funding of on-arrival services be replaced with a grants-based approach, with a focus on encouraging partnerships and collaboration between different agencies.

Recommendation 15

RCOA recommends that organisations contracted to deliver settlement services be required to demonstrate specific expertise in working with people from refugee backgrounds and an understanding of the needs of communities settling in their local area.

11. Links between the HSS and CCS and other services

- 11.1. Feedback received by RCOA suggests that established settlement services are best-placed to deliver the CCS program. As organisations with specific expertise and a proven track record in working with people from refugee backgrounds, they are well-equipped to respond to the significant challenges faced by refugee and humanitarian entrants with complex needs. In addition, providing the CCS program within established settlement services allows people who are already vulnerable and facing significant challenges in their lives from having to navigate and establish trust with two different agencies at a time when they are
- 11.2. In relation to other settlement services, RCOA notes the importance of ensuring that the information and support provided to refugee and humanitarian entrants is consistent, accurate and relevant to their needs. We have received feedback indicating that the information provided to resettled refugees before they arrive in Australia is not always accurate, particularly in relation to avenues for family reunion. A number of former refugees have related being told before they departed for Australia that they would be able to sponsor family members to join them later. In some cases, this information influenced their decisions to resettle in Australia or to leave some family members behind. In reality, family reunion is often a very lengthy process even for immediate family members and in some cases is impossible. Some former refugees, after acting on poor advice provided pre-arrival, are now facing indefinite or permanent separation from family members who living in very difficult or even dangerous circumstances overseas. Given the often devastating impacts of family separation, RCOA believes it is imperative that accurate information is provided about family reunion pathways before refugees arrive in Australia, in particular through the Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO) program.
- 11.3. RCOA also notes the importance of ensuring complementarity between HSS and longer-term settlement services provided under the Settlement Grants program. As HSS is a short-term, on-arrival program, it is important to recognise its limitations in terms of communicating all of the information that new arrivals will need to navigate life in Australia. As noted in Section 1, the initial period of settlement is one of the most challenging because new arrivals are juggling multiple settlement priorities and learning a great deal of new information at once. This is period is particularly challenging for survivors of torture and trauma who may experience difficulties with retaining new information. As such, it is important that longer-term settlement services provide opportunities to reinforce information communicated through the HSS and AUSCO programs.
- 11.4. At the same time, however, it is important to note that Settlement Grants services should not be viewed merely as an extension of the HSS. The purpose of the Settlement Grants program is not simply to extend or fill the gaps in HSS program but to build on and complement HSS by providing additional and more specific support to meet longer-term settlement needs. While Settlement Grants services do provide an opportunity to strengthen lessons learned through the HSS program, they also play an important stand-alone role in facilitating positive settlement outcomes. As such, while we believe that the HSS program and Settlement Grants services should be complimentary, the distinctive purpose and focus of each program should be maintained in order to meet the varying needs of people at different stages in their settlement journey.
- 11.5. RCOA also stresses the need to ensure that, where referrals are made to mainstream services, these services are skilled and trained in supporting people from refugee backgrounds. Mainstream services often have difficulties in understanding the complex range of issues faced by people from refugee backgrounds and may simply refer people back to specialised settlement services. This not only prevents the individual client from accessing the services they need (and to which they are entitled) but also places additional pressure on settlement services which may

not be adequately funded to deliver the additional support which mainstream services are supposed to provide. In order to ensure effective referrals and positive outcomes for clients, it is important that staff of mainstream agencies receive adequate training to ensure that they are able to meet the needs of people from refugee backgrounds.

- 11.6. A final concern relates to the limited support services available to asylum seekers. In the absence of adequate Government-funded support, many asylum seekers in the community have turned for assistance to non-government organisations, charities and community groups offering services such as emergency relief, housing assistance, English classes and low-cost household goods. As increasing numbers of asylum seekers have been released into the community (most of whom are not permitted to work and subsist on minimal income support), demand for these services has risen and the groups providing them have come under significant pressure. A HSS provider consulted by RCOA noted that many of these services previously provided important assistance to HSS clients but were now struggling to meet the needs of a larger group of vulnerable people.
- 11.7. Unless the deficiencies in the service provision model for asylum seekers are addressed, it is likely that other community support services which provide key referral points for HSS providers will find their resources increasingly stretched. This is of particular concern given that TPV and some Protection Visa holders are not eligible for the HSS program and will therefore be more reliant on alternative community support options.

Recommendation 16

RCOA recommends that the information on family reunion opportunities provided to refugees prior to resettlement in Australia be reviewed to ensure its accuracy.

Recommendation 17

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government review the service delivery framework for Status Resolution Support Services, in line with the recommendations made in RCOA's submission on the 2014-15 Refugee and Humanitarian Program.²

12. Involvement of refugee communities in the settlement process

- 12.1. Research, such as RCOA's *The Strength Within* report,³ shows that refugee community organisations play a vital and often unrecognised role in supporting the settlement of new arrivals. These groups provide significant (and often unfunded) assistance in range of areas, including social participation, supporting employment transitions, providing a bridge to mainstream services, settlement support, orientation and community education, promoting health and wellbeing, building social connections and keeping people informed and connected.
- 12.2. Common examples of the support provided by refugee communities include providing transport, meeting and greeting new arrivals at the airport, providing short and long-term accommodation, interpreting and translating, orientation, providing employment links, offering education advice and supplying material goods. This support, when provided by communities for their own members, can draw directly on culturally-specific knowledge, norms and language, reducing the need for language and bicultural facilitators (such as interpreters). Refugee community organisations can also fill gaps in mainstream service provision, particularly where there is a mismatch between community needs and funding priorities and timing.
- 12.3. Refugee community members have expressed a keen desire to be further recognised and supported in the role they play in settlement. Refugee community organisations have asked to be funded so that the community can continue to provide much needed and specialised support for new arrivals in their community. Investing in these largely volunteer-run community structures moves further towards a strengths-based model of refugee resettlement that

² Available at http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/isub/2014-15_Intake%20sub.pdf (see in particular the recommendations listed in Sections 5.8.1, 5.8.2 and 5.8.6).

³ Refugee Council of Australia (2014) *The Strength Within: The role of refugee community organisations in settlement*, available at http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/rpt/1405_StrengthWithin.pdf

recognises the resilience, skills and experiences of refugees themselves and the valuable and cost-effective contribution they can make to providing holistic settlement support.

- 12.4. Models such as AMES's *Community Guides Program* recognise the significant role refugee community members play in resettlement.⁴ Under this program, "Community Guides (usually from a refugee background themselves) are employed to provide settlement support to new arrivals in the entrant's first language."⁵ This program has been highly successful in increasing the support of newly arrived entrants, as well as providing meaningful employment to more settled refugee community members. RCOA recommends that the Government consider implementing a program similar to the Community Guides program with other HSS providers.
- 12.5. Service providers have also called for community development focus of the HSS program to be enhanced. A community development model recognises the strengths and capacity of new arrivals and seeks to capitalise on their existing skills in to achieve positive settlement outcomes. One HSS provider consulted by RCOA noted that it had seen "immense benefits" after adopting a community development approach towards assisting Women at Risk entrants.

Recommendation 18

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government recognise the important role played by refugee community organisations in the settlement process through providing adequate funding to support their work with new arrivals.

Recommendation 19

RCOA recommends that the inclusion of people from refugee backgrounds in the design and delivery of on-arrival services be embedded within the HSS and CCS programs.

Recommendation 20

RCOA recommends that, in partnership with other HSS providers, a model similar to the AMES Community Guides program be implemented in other HSS contract regions.

⁴ See <http://www.ames.net.au/settling-in-australia/community-guides-program.html>, as well as a review undertaken by the UNSW Centre for Refugee Research (below).

⁵ UNSW Centre for Refugee Research, "*Unsung Heroes*": an evaluation of the AMES Community Guides program, available at http://www.ames.net.au/files/file/Research/Unsung_Heroes.pdf