



# **Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN) Submission to the NSW Settlement Strategy Consultations**

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## Acknowledgements

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Thank you to RCAN committee members for agreeing for RCAN to contribute this submission. The following are RCAN committee members for 2022:

1. Atem Atem (President)
2. Bijan Kardooni (secretary)
3. David Ajang (Treasurer)
4. Jasmina Bajraktarevic-Hayward (Public Officer)
5. John Roc (Committee member)
6. Bilal Waheed (Committee member)

Finally, RCAN could not have put together this submission if it was not for Multicultural NSW reaching out. RCAN appreciates contributing to the development of the first ever NSW Settlement Strategy. It was an honour for RCAN to be invited to make a submission in writing. Thank you, Multicultural NSW.

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Acknowledgement of Country</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. About RCAN</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>4. Background</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>5. Settlement Planning, coordination and implementation</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>6. The Settlement Journey</b>	<b>8</b>
I. Definition	8
II. Successful settlement	9
III. Applying the settlement journey approach	10
IV. Domains of settlement under the settlement journey approach	10
<b>7. Restoring the family and community</b>	<b>11</b>
V. Restoring Family	11
VI. Child Protection	12
VII. Domestic and Family Violence	13
VIII. Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Children/Young People	15
IX. Women with Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Backgrounds	17
X. Health	18
XI. Nutrition	19
XII. Housing	20
XIII. Restoring Community	21
<b>8. Achieving social and economic status similar or better than before migration</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>9. Gaining acceptance and recognition of the host community in particular the local host community</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>10. Conclusion</b>	<b>26</b>

## 1. Acknowledgement of Country

Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN) would like to acknowledge the First Nations Peoples of NSW and pay respects to their elders past, present and future. RCAN acknowledges and pays respects to any First Nations' Peoples who may read this submission.

## 2. About RCAN

RCAN is NSW-based community organisation. RCAN is a refugee led and driven advocacy organisation. At the heart of RCAN is refugee lived experience. It is the refugee lived experience that informs the work of RCAN. RCAN embraces the diverse range of the refugee experience.

RCAN uses the term refugee as an all-encompassing term including humanitarian entrants, asylum seekers and migrants with refugee like backgrounds. RCAN promotes, represents and celebrates refugees and their communities. RCAN does not only advocate for refugee voices to be heard where it matters but also works to ensure that refugees can influence policies and programs that impact on them and their communities in NSW, Australia and globally.

## 3. Introduction

RCAN welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the NSW Settlement Strategy Consultation. RCAN's submission focuses on the settlement journey as a concept and proposes alternative settlement domains. The settlement journey domains provide the framework for this submission. Before discussing the settlement journey domains, however, the submission provides some background section for context. This is followed by discussion of settlement planning, coordination, and implementation. A conceptual discussion of the settlement journey including its domains follows before making further comments.

## 4. Background

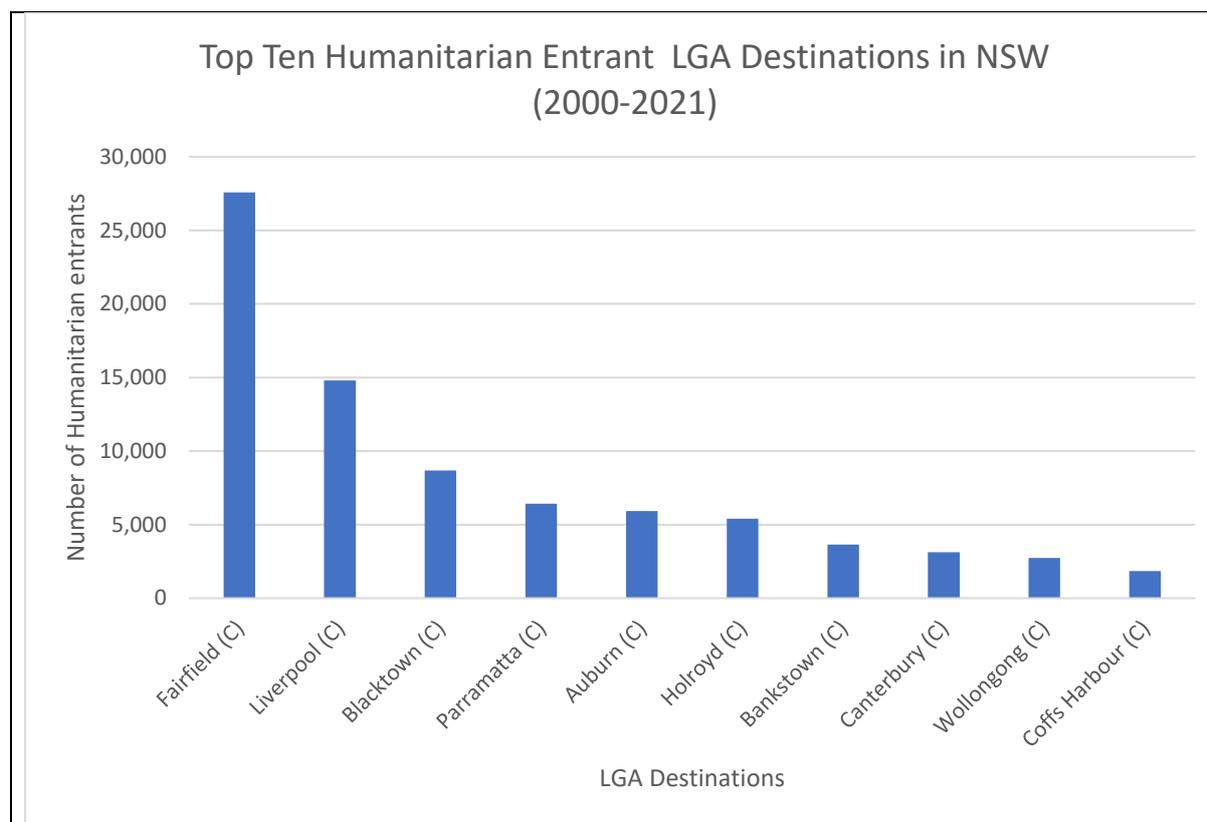
In the period between the beginning of 2000 and end of 2020, NSW received about a third of all humanitarian entrants coming to Australia. According to figures obtained from the Department of Home Affairs, NSW saw the arrival of just under hundred thousand (98,958) humanitarian entrants in that period.<sup>1</sup> NSW is also a home to a significant number of asylum seekers. Some asylum seekers have been waiting for nearly ten years for their asylum claims to be finalised. In addition, NSW is also home to many migrants who have refugee like backgrounds.

In NSW, humanitarian entrants, people seeking asylum and migrants with refugee like backgrounds settle mainly in Western Sydney. Western Sydney continues to be a significant region for humanitarian entrants' settlement. See Chart 1 below.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Home Affairs. "Humanitarian Settlers with Dates of Arrival between 01/01/2000 to 31/12/2020 recorded as Residents of NSW." Settlement Database as of 04/02/2021.

Chart 1 Top Ten Humanitarian Entrant LGA Destination in NSW (2000-2020)



Source: Department of Home Affairs. "Humanitarian Settlers with Dates of Arrival between 01/01/2000 to 31/12/2020 recorded as Residents of NSW." Settlement Database as of 04/02/2021.

Chart 1 above shows that eight of the top ten humanitarian entrant local government area (LGA) destinations in NSW are all located in Western Sydney. In addition, the chart shows that Southwest Sydney, mainly Fairfield, Liverpool and Canterbury-Bankstown LGAs, have settled over 50% of all humanitarian entrants who came to NSW over that time. Other Western Sydney LGAs that received large numbers of humanitarian entrants and asylum seekers include Blacktown, Parramatta and Cumberland.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to settling in Metropolitan Sydney, humanitarian entrants also settle in NSW regional areas. Chart 1 above shows that the last two LGAs from the top ten humanitarian entrant destinations are in regional NSW including Wollongong and Coffs Harbour. Other regional NSW destinations include Wagga Wagga and the Riverina region, Albury, Newcastle, and Armidale. Since only 15% of all humanitarian entrants to NSW are settled in

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the distribution of asylum seekers in NSW, See Refugee Council of Australian. "Statistics on People Seeking Asylum in the Community." <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/asylum-community/7/>.

Cumberland LGA comprise of former Holroyd LGA and parts of former Auburn and Parramatta LGAs. See Cumberland City Council. "New Council Announced." Media Release. 13 May 2016. <https://www.cumberland.nsw.gov.au/news/new-council-announced>.

regional NSW compared to 83% in metropolitan Sydney, most of this submission will focus on metropolitan Sydney<sup>3</sup>.

Western Sydney has some of the most disadvantaged local areas in NSW. Southwest Sydney has the worse social and economic outcomes in NSW. Fairfield LGA is the most disadvantaged area in metropolitan Sydney. In Blacktown LGA, suburbs with significant level of socioeconomic disadvantage including Mount Druitt host many humanitarian entrants.<sup>4</sup> The controversial SBS documentary *Struggle Street*, which came out a couple of years ago, showed the significant level of socioeconomic disadvantage in Mount Druitt.<sup>5</sup>

Western Sydney and in particular those areas where humanitarian entrants and people seeking asylum settle are characterised by poverty, high unemployment, and poor infrastructure. Western Sydney has become a home to many humanitarian entrants because it traditionally provided cheap housing and employment opportunities in manufacturing. However, Western Sydney housing market has changed with population growth making it challenging for many, including humanitarian entrants, to afford the high cost of renting in an extremely tight housing market. Social housing and affordable housing have not been keeping up with housing demand. The Fairfield Housing Taskforce in 2021 reported that humanitarian entrants were paying up 80% of their income on rent.<sup>6</sup> Although manufacturing still plays a significant role in Western Sydney and is expanding, it is not providing the kind of unskilled jobs that it provided readily in the past.

In Coffs Harbour, one of the areas that receives large number of humanitarian entrants in regional NSW, the housing situation is made more difficult by the influx of people from metropolitan areas such as Sydney. The COVID-19 Pandemic has demonstrated that work can be done from anywhere. As a result, people do not have to be in Sydney working in an office. Therefore, Coffs Harbour and other regional towns experienced influx of new residents making an already tight housing market even tighter. There is housing crisis in Coffs Harbour which is likely to have a significant negative impact on recently arrived humanitarian entrant settlement and the settlement of future humanitarian arrivals there. If the housing situation does not improve in regional NSW in general, regional settlement can be jeopardised.

Another reason humanitarian entrants come to Western Sydney is the links (social, cultural and religious) they have to established communities from previous waves of migration. This means that recently arrived humanitarian entrants can access vital social and cultural

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<sup>3</sup> Shergold, P. "NSW Coordinator General for Refugee Settlement 5 Years in Review." <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59ae4a2a6f4ca38d47990cd8/t/60cfdfa928405b491073b819/1624235975052/CGRR+5+years+in+review+report.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Blacktown City Council. "Mount Druitt – Precinct Social Atlas." Also see A WSWS Reporting Team. "Sydney's Mount Druitt: A Microcosm of Australia's Social Crisis." World Socialist Web Site. 30 May 2015. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/05/30/mtdr-m30.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Rich, Jessica. "SBS Series Struggle Street Sparks Debate in Mount Druitt." SBS News. 7 May 2015. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/sbs-series-struggle-street-sparks-debate-in-mt-druitt/5jlgxexb5>

<sup>6</sup> Haigh, F., El-Rouehib, C., Martinez, G., Atem, A., Batt, B. and Saliba, M. 2021. Mental Wellbeing Impact Assessment of Refugee Transitional Housing Support Program. Centre of Health Equity and Training, Research and Evaluation (CHETRE), University of NSW. <https://corecs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/MWIAReportFinal.pdf>.

support critical for their settlement. In addition, Western Sydney has developed a network of settlement support services which humanitarian entrants can access. The existence of established communities and settlement support services is a unique feature of Western Sydney that enables humanitarian settlement.

Finally, in the last two years of the COVID-19 Pandemic, recently arrived humanitarian entrants were impacted in a big way by COVID-19 and associated public health measures. Greater Western Sydney was hit hard by COVID-19 in 2021. The response of authorities was retraumatising for many humanitarian entrants who lived there. Southwest Sydney experienced the toughest lockdown regime in NSW if not in Australia. The lockdown was characterised by curfew like conditions with people expected to stay in their houses. The police (the Mounted Horse Unit) and the army were out on the streets.<sup>7</sup> Residents reported choppers monitoring their movement from above. To many people with humanitarian entrant backgrounds the response of authorities reminded them of the oppressive military operations they endured in their home countries before migrating to Australia.

The COVID-19 Pandemic experience in 2021 has also highlighted the failure of authorities in preparing communities in Western Sydney in particular humanitarian entrants and migrant communities. Authorities struggled to get health messages and information across to humanitarian entrant and migrant communities. Therefore, authorities had to recognise the important role refugee and migrant communities and their community infrastructure including organisations, social and religious institutions and the networks of support they built around them could play in improving communication with communities they represent.

Before COVID-19 humanitarian entrant and migrant community infrastructure was neglected. Humanitarian entrant and migrant communities have advocated for the need for funding to support them to continue doing the important work they do and to strengthen community infrastructure. They were ignored until COVID-19 hit. Many humanitarian entrant and migrant community leaders were being asked by authorities to assist in disseminating complex health messages which health professionals struggled to explain. At the height of the pandemic in 2021, health information and messaging changed every couple of hours. Humanitarian entrant and migrant community leaders, as they were dealing with COVID-19 outbreaks in their own communities and the re-traumatisation caused by often insensitive state response as discussed above, were expected to receive, translate, and deliver health messages and orders to their communities for free. Authorities were reluctant to pay community leaders for their time, expertise, and knowledge.

It is important to acknowledge that during the height of COVID-19 in 2021, Multicultural NSW made a range of grant funding available to ensure that initiatives proposed by community organisations to address gaps in COVID-19 messaging were implemented. Grant funding was also made available to enable community organisations assist their communities deal with the impact of COVID-19 and lockdowns.

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<sup>7</sup> Kontominas, B. and Taouk, M. "NSW Police Deny targeting Multicultural Communities in COVID-19 Operations." ABC New. 9 July 2021. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-09/nsw-police-defend-covid-19-operation-in-south-west-sydney/100280106>.

## 5. Settlement Planning, coordination and implementation

The office of Coordinator General for Refugee Settlement (CGRS) was established in response to recommendation by the New South Wales Auditor-General in 2012. The Audit Office New South Wales examined how well NSW responded to settlement needs of recently arrived humanitarian entrants. The New South Wales Auditor-General recommended that:

... the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Community Relations Commission revise the existing immigration, planning and settlement structure (the NSW Government Immigration Settlement and Planning Committee) or develop an alternate structure that has the responsibility and authority to be the central point for New South Wales to develop, coordinate and implement its statewide settlement policy and planning, including to:

- hold agencies accountable
- work in collaboration with the Commonwealth
- develop partnerships with NSW local government organisations

We recommend that the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Community Relations Commission ... use the above structure to ensure humanitarian entrants are included in settlement planning at a State level.<sup>8</sup>

The CGRS established the Joint Partnership Working Group (JPWG) on refugee settlement to support the NSW Government Immigration Settlement Planning Committee. As a result, settlement planning in NSW has become better coordinated.

There are two areas, however, in which planning, coordination and implementation could be better improved in line with the NSW Auditor-General's recommendation as outlined above. Firstly, engagement with local government organisations in areas hosting the most humanitarian entrants could be improved. Fairfield Local Government Area (LGA) hosts the largest number of humanitarian entrants in the state and arguably the country. However, Fairfield City Council has not been included in the JPWG. Similarly, as far as RCAN can tell, Liverpool, Blacktown and Cumberland councils are not included. Instead, Local Government NSW (LGNSW), a nongovernment advocacy organisation represents local government organisations at the JPWG. As a consequent, the local government areas that need to be around the table at the JPWG to provide detailed on the ground perspectives on settlement are sidelined. Settlement planning, coordination and implementation of initiatives is made more difficult in those local government areas such as Fairfield LGA were the lack of direct engagement with local council means no interest from local government to get involved when initiatives are being rolled out.

The lack of direct engagement with local governments hosting the largest numbers of humanitarian entrants created a situation where those local governments became publicly vocal about what they see as failure in settlement planning. Fairfield City Council had been vocal about how settlement planning failed to address the significant needs of those settling in Fairfield. Fairfield City Council would not have found it necessary to criticise settlement

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<sup>8</sup> Audit Office New South Wales. 2012. "Settling Humanitarian Entrants in NSW." P 22.  
[https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf-downloads/2012\\_Settling\\_humanitarian\\_entrants\\_in\\_NSW.pdf](https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf-downloads/2012_Settling_humanitarian_entrants_in_NSW.pdf).

planning publicly if it was able to express those views directly at the JPWG. It is important, however, to acknowledge that the CGRS has routinely met with Councils with large numbers of humanitarian entrants including Fairfield City Council to hear their concerns. The CGRS was a strong advocate for the Fairfield City Settlement Action Plan (FCSAP) including supporting the implementation, coordination, and escalation of issues identified by the FCSAP working group and providing financial support to evaluate the FCSAP.

The second area, is to do with the recommendation by the NSW Auditor General that 'humanitarian entrants are included in settlement planning at a state level.' As far as RCAN is concerned, humanitarian entrants are not directly involved in the JPWG or at any other settlement planning at the state level. RCAN has previously made enquiries about the lack of direct representation of humanitarian entrants at JPWG.

### **Recommendation 1**

- 1.1 JPWG invites Fairfield, Liverpool, Blacktown and Cumberland Councils to Join the JPWG. Local Government NSW to continue as JPWG member.
- 1.2 JPWG invites Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN) to Join the JPWG. RCAN will work with JPWG to determine how humanitarian entrants could participate in settlement planning at the state level including representation at JPWG.

## **6. The Settlement Journey**

### **I. Definition**

RCAN is encouraged to learn that the NSW Settlement Strategy is developed around the idea of settlement journey. However, it is not clear how the Strategy defines settlement journey. RCAN would define settlement journey in terms of the agency of those settling. Therefore, settlement journey is about how those settling use their agency to navigate the settlement process to achieve their own self determined settlement outcome.

Settlement outcomes from the perspective of those settling are subjective. Subjective settlement outcomes vary from one person to another depending on their status in the family and community. It also depends on gender and age. The Settlement journey framework also recognises that settlement takes place in a complex context. Western Sydney or the regional area where settlement happens provide that context. In that context the availability and the nature of settlement support is critical. The level and accessibility to other government support is important.

Another dimension of the settlement context is whether the local community is welcoming and understanding of what it means to navigate settlement (is the local community socially, culturally and linguistically diverse? Are there established migrant community organisations including religious, social and welfare organisations? Are those organisations receiving sufficient support from the state including funding, technical support, and advocacy support?). Therefore, the concept of settlement journey is complex and provides a better way of analysing settlement because it places settlement in a wider context. This notion of

settlement journey rejects the top-down definition of settlement that is often imposed by government and other authorities.

## **Recommendation 2**

NSW Settlement Strategy defines settlement journey as the process whereby those settling use their agency to navigate their settlement process to achieve their own self-determined settlement outcomes.

### II. Successful settlement

The Settlement journey approach suggests that successful settlement is about those settling employing their agency to progress towards achieving their settlement expectations and aspirations. This means that those settling feel that the support they receive recognises and builds on the strengths they bring with them. Humanitarian entrants and migrants bring with them a range of skills. They bring skills, technical knowledge and work experiences that can set them up successfully in the employment market. Humanitarian entrants are more likely to use their skills, knowledge and work experiences gained before coming to Australia to start a business in Australia more than any other migrants.<sup>9</sup>

Humanitarian entrants, like other migrants, bring with them cultural and social assets that contribute to Australia's cultural and social development. These could include spiritual beliefs, worldviews, and positive attitudes. They bring with them new food and different ways of cultural expression such as dance, costumes and dressing. They also educate the Australian community about the countries they come from and often about the human rights violations that are taking place in their home countries.

Humanitarian entrants can also help the Australia community to shift the way they think about social, economic, and political problems. Many humanitarian entrants are indigenous to the parts of the world they migrated from. Therefore, they may provide new ways of thinking about climate change and how to manage the fragile ecosystem Australia is.

Therefore, as much as successful settlement is about humanitarian entrants progressing towards achieving their settlement expectations and aspirations, it (successful settlement) is also about humanitarian entrants using their beliefs, cultural knowledge, and traditional understanding of the world to contribute to addressing intractable social, political, and economic problems that impact Australia. As such, humanitarian entrants can use their agency to get involved in social and political processes to bring change. The last Federal election saw Dai Le, who came to Australia as humanitarian entrant with her family many years ago, elected to parliament. Dai Le has contributed to local social and political processes for many years and now she will make important contributions to national politics and the Australian society. This is what can happen when the agency of humanitarian entrants is placed at the centre of settlement.

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<sup>9</sup> Hugo, G. 2011. "Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation of Humanitarian Entrants." Department of Immigration and Citizenship. <https://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/2544/1/Economic-social-civic-contributions.pdf>.

### III. Applying the settlement journey approach

Policy development based on needs focuses on deficit. Settlement policy and settlement support services have focused on meeting the needs of humanitarian entrants and some migrants. This has been challenging as settlement outcomes are sometime unsatisfactory. Settlement outcomes for humanitarian entrants in areas such as employment and income are worse compared to other migrant groups.<sup>10</sup> The shift away from needs analysis to understanding the settlement journey can lead to better settlement outcomes for those settling.

The starting point for the settlement journey approach as defined above is to ask those who are undertaking the settlement journey where they expect (settlement aspirations) the settlement journey to take them and how they would like to get there. Also, the settlement journey approach values and builds on the strengths that those settling bring with them or have already gained. With a clear understanding of settlement expectations, aspirations and strengths, the next question is what support must be provided to build on the identified strengths which ensure that those settling can make progress in achieving their settlement expectations and aspirations.

#### **Recommendation 3**

NSW Settlement Strategy applies the settlement Journey approach that encompasses:

- Settlement expectation and aspirations of those settling
- Strengths that they bring with them and how to apply those to achieve their settlement expectations and aspirations
- Support must be provided to build on the identified strengths to enable those settling to make progress.

### IV. Domains of settlement under the settlement journey approach

Australia's Humanitarian Program prioritises granting settlement places to vulnerable refugee families. Therefore, the success of the family in restoring its normal functioning including socialising children is critical for successful settlement. In consulting for this submission, community leaders emphasised the importance of restoring the family function in the process of settlement. Family plays a central role in successful settlement of humanitarian entrants in relation to enhancing social inclusion, integration and cohesion.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, restoration of humanitarian entrant families is critical as a domain of settlement.

In addition, to family, the role of established humanitarian entrant and refugee community organisations is significant in supporting settlement. The community infrastructure they

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<sup>10</sup> Australian Survey Research Group. 2011. "Settlement Outcomes of New arrivals – Study for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship." Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Pp 27-33.

<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settlement-services-subsite/files/settlement-outcomes-new-arrival.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Wicks, R., Kooy, J., Pawell, R. and Moran, C. 2019. "The Social Impact of Family Separation on Refugee Settlement and Inclusion in Australia." Monash University. <https://doi.org/10.26180/5d8c828187b88> also [https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/The\\_social\\_impacts\\_of\\_family\\_separation\\_on\\_refugee\\_settlement\\_and\\_inclusion\\_in\\_Australia\\_Executive\\_Summary/9922724](https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/The_social_impacts_of_family_separation_on_refugee_settlement_and_inclusion_in_Australia_Executive_Summary/9922724).

build is critical for successful settlement as it enhance the building of strong social capital necessary for bonding, bridging and linking.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, restoration of community is important for successful settlement.

Social and economic wellbeing is important. Humanitarian entrants and refugees come to Australia with certain social and economic settlement expectation and aspiration outcomes. They expect that on arrival to Australia they would have access to social and economic development opportunities that will restore their social and economic status to what it was before migration or even better. As pointed out already, humanitarian entrants and refugees bring with them skills, knowledge and experiences that they look forward to using to enhance their settlement prospects. Therefore, achieving social and economic status similar and or better to that prior to migration is the essence of what successful settlement is for humanitarian entrants.

The achievement of social and economic outcomes and indeed successful settlement is dependent on gaining acceptance and recognition from the host community. Any hostility refugees experience from their host community especially the local host community negatively impact settlement outcomes. Even when humanitarian entrants and refugees succeed in achieve economic outcomes and restore their families and community, any sense that the host community is not accepting of them can make social inclusion, integration and cohesion difficult to achieve. So, gaining acceptance and recognition from the host community is key in achieving successful settlement.

Therefore, Under the settlement journey approach, the following constitute settlement domains:

- Restoration of the family and community
- Achieving social and economic status similar or better than before migration
- Gaining acceptance and recognition of the host community in particular the host local community

#### **Recommendation 4**

NSW Settlement Strategy adopts the following as settlement domains:

- 4.1 Restoration of the family and community
- 4.2 Achieving social and economic status similar or better than before migration
- 4.3 Gaining acceptance and recognition of the host community

#### **7. Restoring the family and community**

##### **V. Restoring Family**

Australia's humanitarian migration program is family oriented. This means that the program brings refugee families to Australia and promotes family reunion by allowing those already in Australia to sponsor family members or others who are still overseas often in first

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<sup>12</sup> Gow, G. 2005. "Assyrian Community Capacity Building in Fairfield." University of Western Sydney and Assyrian Workers Network.  
[https://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/2827/1/Gow\\_AssyrianCommunityCapacityBuilding\\_Report.pdf](https://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/2827/1/Gow_AssyrianCommunityCapacityBuilding_Report.pdf).

countries of asylum to come to Australia. The overwhelming proportion (80%) of humanitarian entrants come to Australia in that manner.<sup>13</sup> Also, Australia has a significant family migration program that allows all migrants to sponsor family members to come to Australia. It is more difficult and costly for humanitarian entrants and refugees to bring family members to Australia through the family migration stream.

For humanitarian entrants, family restoration is important because many of them come from situations where families must break up.<sup>14</sup> This can be a deliberate survival strategy or can be forced by traumatic events including war and displacement. It is common to find that humanitarian entrants, at some point in their migration journey, have lost contact with family members. In fact, many humanitarian entrants join their families in Australia for the first time since the traumatic events that forced the family to break up many years before.

The work of family restoration is critical in humanitarian settlement. Support services such as NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) are so critical in that regard. STARTTS not only provides clinical support to individuals to deal with PTSD and other impacts of trauma, but also provides family focused support service such as Families in Cultural Transition (FiCT). The aim of FiCT is to restore the humanitarian entrant family through recognising the strengths families bring with them and building on those strengths to educate parents about their legal obligations in Australia and the network of support services available to them in many cases for free. Also, FiCT helps families recognise potential challenges to family dynamics resulting from the refugee journey and develop healthy coping strategies to address those challenges.

### **Recommendation 5**

NSW government provides ongoing funding to STARTTS to ensure that the FiCT program is strengthened and made available to all Humanitarian Entrants in NSW.

## VI. Child Protection

Most humanitarian entrants come to Australia with the expectation and the hope that they would receive support to ensure that their families are restored. However, on arrival in Australia humanitarian entrants are confronted with child protection regimes that are foreign, incomprehensible and often openly hostile to them. For example, African humanitarian entrants who have settled in NSW felt that child protection authorities were out to take their children off them.<sup>15</sup> This sense of fear is well placed. A look at the history of child protection and indigenous families confirms those fears. In 2007, the Australia government offered an apology to indigenous people of Australia for the removal of an

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<sup>13</sup> Audit Office New South Wales. 2012. "Settling Humanitarian Entrants in NSW." P 14.

[https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf-downloads/2012\\_Settling\\_humanitarian\\_entrants\\_in\\_NSW.pdf](https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf-downloads/2012_Settling_humanitarian_entrants_in_NSW.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Refugee Council of Australia. 2016. "Addressing the Pain of Separation for Refugee Families." P 1.

<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Addressing-the-pain-of-separation-for-refugee-families.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Doney, G., Pittaway, E., Lee, J., Holtz, K. and Aitken, H. 2010. "Parents' Rights, Children's Rights? Issues for Refugee Families in Australia." Centre for Refugee Research (UNSW) and Relationship Australia. Pp 12-14.

[https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/RA\\_families\\_report\\_131210.pdf](https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/RA_families_report_131210.pdf).

entire generation of indigenous children under the pretext of child protection. Unfortunately, Indigenous people in NSW continue to see their children taken away from them by child protection authorities sometime unlawfully.<sup>16</sup> African families with humanitarian entrant backgrounds have experienced the horrors of child removal by child protection authorities.

Some parents with humanitarian entrant backgrounds accuse NSW child protection authorities of being unnecessarily heavy handed. Such parents feel that the intervention in their families means that they could not parent as freely as they would like.<sup>17</sup> To make the situation worse, child protection authorities have little or no understanding of humanitarian entrants who have significantly different cultural understanding of parenting and child protection.<sup>18</sup> It is puzzling for many parents with humanitarian entrant backgrounds that they are perceived as not protecting their children in Australia when they did everything they could to protect them through war, displacement and asylum.

## **Recommendation 6**

- 6.1 The NSW Joint Partnership Working Group (JPWG) on Settlement hold a refugee and humanitarian entrant child protection and family support submit bringing together refugee and humanitarian entrant communities, child protection authorities and family support service providers to review and identify strategies and challenges experienced by refugees/humanitarian entrants, child protection and family support services in supporting recently arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants in their desire to restore the family. The Summit should produce a co-designed model of intervention.
- 6.2 NSW Settlement Strategy should include focus on child protection and mutual education – families about the system and system about families. Multicultural NSW establishes a child protection learning circle to bring together child protection and refugee families on regular basis to promote ongoing learning.

## VII. Domestic and Family Violence

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<sup>16</sup> McGown, M. "People Think It is All in the Past': Push to Reform System Taking Aboriginal Kids from Families." The Guardian. 14 March 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/mar/14/people-think-its-all-in-the-past-push-to-reform-system-taking-aboriginal-kids-from-families>.

<sup>17</sup> See Doney et al. "Parents Rights, Child Rights."

<sup>18</sup> Kaur, J. 2012. "Cultural Diversity and Child Protection: A Review of Australian Research on the Needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) and Refugee Children and Families." Diversity Consultants. [https://www.unisa.edu.au/contentassets/463f611a5f8645c09e089cd8cb43c7e0/cultural\\_diversity\\_child\\_protection\\_kaur2012\\_a4.pdf](https://www.unisa.edu.au/contentassets/463f611a5f8645c09e089cd8cb43c7e0/cultural_diversity_child_protection_kaur2012_a4.pdf).

Domestic violence (DV) is a serious problem families across Australia must address. It is often reported that one woman a week or every ten days dies in Australia due to domestic violence.<sup>19</sup> Most of these deaths are experienced by Australian born women.<sup>20</sup>

Women in families with humanitarian entrant backgrounds often experience domestic violence. However, it is very challenging for them to speak out due to either cultural or religious reasons or because there is community pressure to not speak up.

DV hinders progress towards achieving the restoration of the family. Men with refugee or humanitarian backgrounds often feel that the Australian system favours women. Therefore, intervention by authorities such as the police when violence occurs and the subsequent court intervention is viewed by some men with humanitarian backgrounds as an intervention of authorities in what is in their view private family matters. Men from Africa with refugee backgrounds prefer that their DV situation is handled by their own community mechanisms which often includes an intervention by a council of men who have cultural or religious authority in the community. In most cases, those councils of men do intervene and address some of the challenges experienced by couples. However, there is much more that needs to be done. Also, it is common for women who engage with such mechanisms to feel dissatisfied with the outcome of such mediation and eventually seek the intervention of authorities when violence escalates again.

Service providers in Southwest Sydney have often pointed out that DV services have not been adequately funded to address DV among recently arrived humanitarian entrant families. They also point to the lack of support for women experiencing DV who are on a partner visa. There is also limited support services for women seeking asylum whose legal status is yet to be determined. Some women in that category have been in Australia for nearly ten years now without clear legal status.

## **Recommendation 7**

- 7.1 NSW Government provides more funding to DV services that work with families with refugee and humanitarian entrant backgrounds to ensure that those families are supported to strengthen protective factors and mitigate risk factors.
- 7.2 Multicultural NSW provides funding to establish a humanitarian entrant, refugee and Migrant Domestic and Family Violence Learning Circle and in the process establishing an ongoing forum for leaders and elders. Such DV learning circle could provide space for continuous learning. The learning circle will complement training already funded and being implemented by NSW Health's Education Centre Against Violence.
- 7.3 Community leaders (both men and women) trained as recommended in (7.2) above could also form refugee and humanitarian entrant DV advisory body to support the courts and court decisions which may adversely impact individuals.

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<sup>19</sup> Cormack, L. "Counting Dead Women and the Men Behind Their Violent Death." The Sydney Morning Herald. 2 June 2018. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/counting-dead-women-and-the-men-behind-their-violent-deaths-20180601-p4zivp.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS). 2022. "Intimate Partner Violence homicides 2010-2018." Pp 34. <https://20ian81kynngg38bl3l3eh8bf-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ADFVDRN-ANROWS-Data-Report-Update.pdf>.

## VIII. Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Children/Young People

One of the aims of family restoration is enabling families to support their children attend school and do well. It is common to hear refugee parents say that the reason why they came to Australia was to secure the education of their children. This parental aspiration for their children is often seen as the measure of successful settlement in the long term. It is pleasing to meet refugee parents who have been in Australia for many years speaking proudly about their now adult children who are doctors, lawyers, engineers or have other professional jobs. To such parents, some of whom worked in the unskilled labour market to support their families, migration and the hard and long hours of work to support the family and children were worth it.

Although the education of children is so critical for refugee and humanitarian families, it is often challenging for some parents to provide the support children need to ensure that they catch up with school. On arrival children are placed in class according to their age. Primary school aged children often join school and receive extra English lessons. Although young children eventually adjust well to learning, they often have missed out on important and basic learning skills. It is often challenging for teachers to provide the necessary support required to help children with refugee backgrounds as teachers are overworked and any additional work to meet the needs of individual students is often not done. The NSW Department of Education provides extra teachers as English As Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) support. This is a critical support program for refugee students. However, the program could benefit from further funding.

For refugee children of high school age, the situation is more challenging. They often come to Australia with disrupted education for those lucky enough to have some. For others it might be that they have never set foot in a classroom before coming to Australia. Often those children come to Australia hoping to do their parents proud by excelling at school and achieving parental dreams for them to become doctors or lawyers. Those children are often under huge pressure from home to succeed in education.

High school aged children on arrival attend Intensive English Centres (where available in their settlement location) for at least two terms. Over that period, they learn English. They also learn about the school and the school system. In recent years, some schools have become aware of the significant need for settlement support as students learn English and adjust to their new school routine. Consequently, the NSW Department of Education developed the Refugee Student Support Program to provide the extra support refugee students need which may including counselling, participating in school activities and mentoring.

The learning challenges for refugee children and young people are huge. Most refugee students can learn to navigate systems. However, some young people with refugee backgrounds who have gone through the school system in Australia point to the sense of exclusion they felt at school. They did not feel that they were part of the school community. They often speak about the fact that teachers did not take time to listen to them and understand their concerns and respond appropriate. They suggest that their Australian born

colleagues at school were treated by teachers with more care and compassion and were often given the benefit of the doubt. They also report that they experienced discrimination and racism at the hands of their Australian born colleagues. Bullying was common at school and when refugee students reported that to the school, they often felt that nothing was done about it. When refugee children were frustrated for lack of action by the school and took matters in their own hands, they were blamed and often received harsh punishment including suspension and even expulsion. Research conducted in Australia has identified some of the issues discussed here.<sup>21</sup>

Refugee and humanitarian entrant young people, therefore, find themselves in impossible situations. At home, they are expected to excel at their schoolwork. Parents often see no reason for their children to underperform at school as their children are receiving one of the best educational opportunities in the world in a safe country. If only they, parents, had that opportunity! Parents are not aware of the challenges their children are experiencing at school. Parents often cannot help their children with schoolwork as they themselves are often learning English and are experiencing settlement challenges. At the community level, young people receive limited support. In fact, young people are expected to listen and not talk back. They are often told what to do and what not to do. Any indication that young people are failing to achieve as expected by their families attracts community condemnation.

With little or no support from the family and school, refugee and humanitarian entrant children can disengage from education as learning becomes more difficult with time. Those children, therefore, experience school as a hostile environment. Refugee and humanitarian entrant young people often disengaged from family and community as well. It is challenging to face parents and community that has expectations that are almost impossible to meet. Eventually, many refugee and humanitarian entrant children/young people drop out of school altogether.

Another challenge for refugee families and students during the pandemic was remote learning. Some refugee families did not have the devices, the data or the knowhow to navigate the virtual classroom. The NSW Government did provide devices and free data to help struggling families. However, there was little support provided to ensure that parents had the necessary skills to support their children use the virtual classroom and control what children could access online. Also, some families had no access to the internet in the first place as their homes were not connected.

Another issue – schools rightly focus on teaching, and they see that as their primary duty. However, when wellbeing is not addressed, engagement with learning is reduced. Schools need to focus on learning outcomes rather than just the teaching process. Learning outcomes are achieved when the whole student is considered and supported, including

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<sup>21</sup> See Victorian Foundation House for Survivors of Torture and Trauma Inc. 2019. "School is Where You Need to Be Equal and Learn – Insights from Students of Refugee Backgrounds on Learning and Engagement in Victorian Secondary Schools." [https://www.foundationhouse.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/STUDENT-PERSPECTIVE-RESEARCH-PROJECT-REPORT\\_A4\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.foundationhouse.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/STUDENT-PERSPECTIVE-RESEARCH-PROJECT-REPORT_A4_WEB.pdf). Also see Witkins, M., Noble, G., and Wong, A. 2018. "It's Complex! Working with Students of Refugee Backgrounds and their Families in New South Wales Public Schools." New South Wales Teachers Federation. [https://www.nswtf.org.au/files/18530\\_its\\_complex\\_centenary\\_report\\_digital.pdf](https://www.nswtf.org.au/files/18530_its_complex_centenary_report_digital.pdf)

their wellbeing. The Department of Education focuses on wellbeing officially, but that is often not understood at individual teacher level.<sup>22</sup>

## **Recommendation 8**

- 8.1 NSW Department of Education continue to adequately fund the Refugee Student Support Program to ensure that refugee students are supported appropriately.
- 8.2 NSW Department of Education to provide further funding to ensure that more teachers could be employed to provide extra English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) support.
- 8.3 NSW Department of Education to provide long term funding to STARTT's School Liaison Program that support refugee students at school.
- 8.4 The NSW Government funds digital literacy education for refugee communities. This can include the provision of digital devices to refugee families.
- 8.5 NSW Department of Infrastructure works with local governments in Western Sydney to map out areas where internet connectivity does not exist and devise ways of improving connectivity.
- 8.6 Schools with Large numbers of humanitarian entrant students undertake audit to ascertain the needs of refugee students and develop a range of support mechanism to ensure students' needs are met.<sup>23</sup>

## IX. Women with Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Backgrounds

Women with refugee and humanitarian backgrounds especially those who arrive with children often see their role in the family as that of providing support to other family members. Their settlement aspiration is to see to it that family members are supported to achieve settlement aspirations. Children and husbands need support through providing care, keeping the house, and cooking. That support ensures that children go to school and husbands learn English and go to work. Therefore, for many refugee and humanitarian entrant women who arrive with children successful settlement is the positive contribution they make to ensure that their families are restored, and individual family members are achieving their settlement aspiration. The current settlement framework based on the National Settlement Framework does not support this way of understanding settlement. Therefore, some recently arrived refugee and humanitarian women, in particular those who arrive with children, are left behind in the race to achieve settlement outcomes in the nine settlement domains as described in the National Settlement Framework.<sup>24</sup>

It is obvious that many humanitarian entrant and refugee women with children do chose to work and do work hard to achieve in the nine settlement domains. Still for them, the success of their children and husbands in achieving their settlement aspirations is critical for their own success.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing> and <https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/educators/about-wellbeing/>

<sup>23</sup> See <https://schoolsequella.det.nsw.edu.au/file/a2091a68-7523-4673-b124-10eacef95f96/1/Refugee-readiness-audit.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Atem, A. 2022. "In the Search for the Good Life: Settlement Experiences of South Sudanese Humanitarian Entrants in Western Sydney." PhD Thesis. Australian National University. <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/267266>.

Programs like School Hubs program have been successful in engaging with refugee women because the program brings much needed support to refugee women in the spaces and in ways that does not conflict with the need for refugee women to provide care and support to other members of the family specially children.

## **Recommendation 9**

- 9.1 Multicultural NSW pilot a program modelled on the school hub program that engages with refugee women, brings services to them at a time when they are available and willing to engage with services. Such services could include programs that enable refugee women to learn skills including digital literacy that they can use currently to assist children but also come handy in the future in accessing services and employment opportunities given that services are moving online.
- 9.2 Department of Communities and Justice, in consultation with refugee women, develop programs that facilitate refugee women's engagement with each other and with the wider community – for example providing weekend culturally appropriate activities such as dance and singing or watching recently produced movies in language and discussing such movies and their relevance to them here in Australia and for those they left behind. Provision of childcare during such activities is important so that women can focus and not worry about children.

## X. Health

Another important aspect of restoring the family is ensuring that refugee and humanitarian entrant families are healthy. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how challenging and unprepared the NSW health system was to support refugee families and communities. In 2021, refugee families were blamed for accelerating the spread of COVID-19. Refugee families were large and too close to each other.

The size and closeness of family members to each was not a problem in itself. This is something that needs to be celebrated not presented as the problem. The problem during COVID-19 was that people with refugee and humanitarian entrant backgrounds held jobs that they could not afford to do at home. They were essential workers without whom working from home for most people would not have been comfortable. It was often people with refugee backgrounds who worked as food delivery people. They were the ones at the store checkout. They were the people who were exposed to COVID-19 and therefore were the most likely to pick it up.

Access to health services has been identified as a significant challenge for recently arrived humanitarian entrants and their families. Trust and agency are the heart of this problem.<sup>25</sup> Refugees and humanitarian entrants do not trust government and their departments. Low level English proficiency and lack of knowledge about the health service system in NSW

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<sup>25</sup> Au, M., Anandakumar, A.D., Preston, R. *et al.* 2019. "A model explaining refugee experiences of the Australian healthcare system: a systematic review of refugee perceptions." *BMC Int Health Hum Rights* vol 19, no. 22. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-019-0206-6>.

among recently arrived refugees does not help restore trust in the NSW health system. In addition, refugees and humanitarian entrants do not feel that they have the agency to influence the decisions that health professionals make about their health. This could be partly about lack of health literacy among refugees. It could also be partly because health professionals have no time or patience to engage in a process that enables the patient to fully understand their options and to make informed decisions.

Currently, many refugees rely on health information coming from family and community members which may not be helpful.

The NSW Refugee Health Service is a great service that engages with the issues raised above and tries to find solutions. Multicultural health services are also well placed to play a significant role in addressing many of such issues. NSW Department of Health has provided directives that all state funded health services must access the interpreter service specialised in communicating with clients who do not speak English fluently. NSW health system has the institutional infrastructure in place to enable it to address the challenges discussed above.

### **Recommendation 10**

Local Health Districts in Western Sydney provide more funding to build the capacity of Multicultural Health Services to:

- 10.1 Strengthen existing multicultural health literacy in particular fund pilot programs that have been developed in response to COVID-19 pandemic which focus on building the capacity of refugee community leaders in using social media and multilingual phone service to communicate health messages. This can also be extended to refugee families through partnering with programs like STARTTS FiCT program.
- 10.2 Establish a refugee and migrant communities health advisory network to ensure that the voice of refugee and migrant communities directly contribute to decision making on health matters of concerns to them. Members of the advisory committee must be paid a sitting fee and for any further work they might be asked to do.

## **XI. Nutrition**

Nutrition is another health-related challenge that some humanitarian entrants experience worse than others. During COVID-19 lockdown in 2021, there were concerns that some refugee families were not able to buy food as local supermarkets in Southwest Sydney stopped momentarily the delivery of orders. Before that, research done in Fairfield (Southwest Sydney) showed that some refugee families were experiencing food insecurity.<sup>26</sup> There were reports that some refugee families were eating a single meal a day. With the current rise in inflation this situation might have worsened.

### **Recommendation 11**

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<sup>26</sup> Southcombe, F. "Feeding the Family in a Familiar Environment: Food Insecurity among Recently Settled Refugees." NSW Refugee Health Service in collaboration with The Smith Family.  
<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.534.5686&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

- 11.1 NSW Refugee Health Service investigates the impact of the current rise in inflation on food insecurity among recently arrived refugee families in Western and Southwest Sydney.
- 11.2 Multicultural NSW makes funding available to refugee community organisations to improve access to affordable nutrition for refugee families.
- 11.3 A project engaging multilingual system navigators/advocates within the NSW health system is developed and piloted in one LHD. Following evaluation, if the project was deemed successful, the model is rolled out across all LHDs.

## XII. Housing

Housing is one of the first challenges refugee families confront. In the first few months after arrival, refugees are assisted to find housing. Those who arrive on certain visa categories can get subsidised rental over that period. However, beyond that and for those sponsored, there is little or no assistance in finding accommodation.

In 2020, the Fairfield Housing Taskforce (FHT) commissioned a mental wellbeing impact assessment to assess the role secure housing plays in improving settlement outcomes. The outcome of that assessment was presented in a report in 2021.<sup>27</sup> The FHT reported that recently arrived humanitarian entrants in Southwest Sydney were paying up to 80% of their income on rent. That is a significant proportion of the family budget. Families were also moving houses often which means that children frequently change schools. Family members move out of neighbourhoods that begin to become familiar. These movements create a sense of instability and make settling in challenging.

The FHT recommended that the NSW Government establish a Refugee Transitional Housing Subsidy scheme modelled on existing housing schemes that allow people with low income to receive a three-year rental subsidy. Such rental subsidy programs allow participants to live in rental properties while they receive support to assist them find sustainable employment by the end of the three years. Having secure accommodation for three years would mean that refugee families would be able to rebuild family as they undertake the settlement journey. The provision of targeted support over that period will ensure that recently arrived humanitarian entrants and refugees focus on settling in.

### **Recommendations 12**

NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) funds a three-year rental Refugee Transitional Housing Subsidy scheme to provide accommodation to 100 recently arrived refugee families. Participating families receive additional support to ensure that they achieve self-reliance (sustainable employment) at the end of that period. This can be done by extending DCJ's rental choice scheme to include 100 recently arrived humanitarian entrants.

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<sup>27</sup> Haigh, F., El-Roueihib, C., Martinez, G., Atem, A., Batt, B. and Saliba, M. 2021. Mental Wellbeing Impact Assessment of Refugee Transitional Housing Support Program. Centre of Health Equity and Training, Research and Evaluation (CHETRE), University of NSW. <https://corecs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/MWIAReportFinal.pdf>.

### XIII. Restoring Community

Restoring refugee and migrant communities is critical in assisting recently arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants feel settled. Refugee communities in Western and Southwest Sydney have often started community organisations as soon as they arrived. They understand that community organisations are vital settlement infrastructure not only because they play a central role in advocating on behalf of their communities but also because they provide culturally appropriate and sensitive services to their communities and in language. Organisations including the Assyrian Resource Centre to name but one, have demonstrated the key role they play in providing formal settlement support services.

Refugee and migrant communities often establish other community infrastructure that create cultural and social spaces where community members could engage. Such infrastructure includes religious houses, community halls and community centres. The more settled communities with refugee backgrounds such as the Assyrians have even established formal schools that promote their language, religious beliefs, and sense of identity while at the same time providing regular school curriculum for their children and young people.

Refugee community organisations were disappointed that over many years before the COVID-19 pandemic the level of funding they received continuously dropped to the point where many refugee-led community organisations could not function sustainably. During COVID-19 outbreak in 2021, the NSW government made more funding available to enable community organisations to promote COVID-19 health messages. Refugee and migrant community organisations have not seen that level of funding for a long time.

Refugee and migrant community organisations including their religious organisations are often not considered when planning settlement and in the distribution of settlement support funding. As noted in the National Settlement Framework, Settlement support is provided in the first five years of settlement.<sup>28</sup> However, settlement service providers and refugee communities have pointed out at every opportunity that the five-year cut off is arbitrary as experience shows that settlement support is needed beyond five years after arrival. It is pleasing to learn that the NSW Settlement Strategy is considering the settlement period to be ten years after arrival.

It is often refugee and migrant community organisations who continue to provide settlement support services to members of their communities long beyond the current five-year settlement period with little or no funding support. When refugee communities apply for funding, it seems that the decision to whether to provide the funding is based on the perceived capacity of refugee communities to manage the funds and deliver the programs they propose. On paper refugee community organisations may appear incapable of managing projects and programs and therefore they are often either denied funding outright or asked to partner with another organisation that has the track record for managing grant money and delivering projects. The agency of refugee communities is inadvertently undermined. It is often forgotten that refugee communities develop and

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<sup>28</sup> Department of Home Affairs. "National Settlement Framework." P 2.  
<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settlement-services-subsite/files/the-national-settlement-framework.pdf>.

deliver programs for their communities with or without funding. They have shown over time how innovative they can be to secure own funding and use volunteers or in-kind support to deliver for their community and families.

### **Recommendation 13**

- 13.1 The NSW Government must continue providing substantial funding to refugee and migrant community organisations through Multicultural NSW to enable community groups to help their own community in a culturally sensitive manner. The prospect of receiving funding will encourage refugee community organisations to gain the capabilities they need to manage funds and projects. Funding should be sufficient to enable core functions of the organisation are supported.
- 13.2 To support refugee and migrant community organisations, the NSW government funds three multicultural hubs based in Blacktown, Fairfield and Paramatta to provide office spaces, computers, printing services and free Wi-Fi. In such multicultural hubs, community leaders and representatives from across refugee and migrant communities could work together. Service providers could also access the multicultural hubs to work with refugee and migrant communities. Government agencies could also collaborate with refugee and migrant community organisations and with other service providers. Cumberland Council has developed such hubs in Auburn and Regents Park enabling refugee-led organisations to access low-cost offices and function spaces. NSW Government could collaborate with local Councils to help develop such hubs.
- 13.3 In the Multicultural hubs as recommended above, the Department of Communities and Justice funds capacity building programs and professional development programs aimed at improving the work of refugee and migrant community organisations in areas such as leadership, organisational, project, financial management and advocacy.

## **8. Achieving social and economic status similar or better than before migration**

The second domain of settlement from the settlement journey perspective, as discussed already, is achieving social and economic status similar or better than before migration. This is an area in which refugees and some migrants struggle. Although many refugees come from rural backgrounds and therefore, are quite happy to achieve a better level of economic prosperity compared to before migration, they find it disappointing that in Australia it could take them many years to find a stable and secure employment. This was not the case in the past when manufacturing provided employment opportunities for unskilled refugees. The transformation that took place in the Australian economy over the past couple of decades means that although manufacturing continues to play significant role in the economies of Western Sydney, it offers limited employment opportunities for those without skills.

A related challenge that some humanitarian entrants experience is the fact that unskilled employment pays so little that they are discouraged from looking for and securing employment. In fact, income support is quite attractive in some cases where out of pocket costs for example childcare costs are significant. Income support payments become comparable to income earned doing unskilled manual jobs. Therefore, it is reasonable for some humanitarian entrants to stay on the welfare income support. The problem for humanitarian entrants who choose to rely on income support in place of getting unskilled

jobs that pay very low is that they remain on income support to the point where they are eventually unable to secure any significant employment.

The most recently arrived humanitarian entrants from Syria and Iraq are often described as the most skilled and educated humanitarian entrants Australia has received in recent years. Many of these refugees have worked in the public services of their home countries before the war broke out which led to their migration to Australia. Many of them are doctors and engineers to mention just two professions. The challenge for this cohort of humanitarian entrants is to find a way to get their skills, knowledge and previous work experience recognised. So far there is very little success for these highly skilled and educated humanitarian entrants to find employment. Back in their home countries those professions gave holders some social status. Their inability to find employment in their previous fields of work means that their social status suffers significantly in Australia. Australian overseas qualification recognition process is complicated and often expensive. There is little guidance for those who seek to have their skills and qualification recognised.

Adults who struggle to get their skills, knowledge and qualification recognised cannot work in their areas of expertise. One of the major pull factors for refugees when deciding to seek refuge in Australia was the expectation that they would find security for their families including the education of children and resumption of their careers. The failure of securing employment as expected has a devastating impact on families. Adults struggle to change careers and see no way out. They feel that they have lost everything including their standing in the community. For many men of refugee backgrounds, the anger and frustration can drive them into anti-social activities such as gambling to escape the reality of their situation. That frustration can create financial challenges for the family which may contribute to domestic and family violence (DFV). The absence of the husband/father at home may lead to disruption of family processes leading to other challenges.

Children may feel the pressure to step up to support the family financially through finding work in the secondary economy or choose to become fulltime carers therefore dropping out of school. The dream of achieving settlement aspiration of restoring family and achieving social and economic status similar to or better than before migration become more difficult to achieve. Some recently arrived community representative reported that wives/mothers in some recently arrived refugee families regret coming to Australia as they watch their family disintegrate further. There is nothing they could do about it.

Although the NSW government invested \$ 22 million over four years between 2016 and 2020 to address the anticipated challenges in finding work for humanitarian entrants the outcome of that investing is not clear to refugee communities who were expected to benefit. The Refugee Employment Support Program (RESP) as it was known could not help highly educated and skilled humanitarian entrants. The RESP may cite examples of successfully placing refugees in training and employment but that is not visible to those who are so highly skilled and educated.

Another program that the NSW government put in place was to create hundred public service places for humanitarian entrants with the appropriate skills and qualifications. That was an important program. However, hundred places were a drop in the ocean. Besides, the

success of those placements in terms of sustainability of employment for those who were successful to fill in those positions is not clear. It is challenging to find that information. New and innovative pilot programs should be evaluated, and evaluation information made public.

Jobactive was the Commonwealth funded employment support program that was meant to help those unemployed to find employment. Unfortunately, a report Commissioned by the Fairfield Multicultural Interagency and written by the Refugee Council of Australia found that recently arrived humanitarian entrants felt that they were not treated respectfully by jobactive providers in Southwest Sydney. Half of the jobactive workload in Southwest Sydney was assisting recently arrived humanitarian entrants find employment. Although jobactive responded positively to the report providing more specific professional development training to their case managers and working more collaboratively with settlement service providers through the Fairfield Employment and Community Services Forum, employment outcomes did not appear to improve in any significant way. With the new Workforce Australia, no refugee-specific licences were issued in NSW, while such licences were issued in Victoria.

Due to settlement policy changes in 2013, settlement service providers were forced to shift focus from social integration to employment outcomes. Settlement service providers were expected to behave like job placement support agencies helping clients to gain skills in finding employment. Although settlement service providers did everything possible to see to it that those outcomes are achieved, the outcome for clients overall did not improve.

The best cohort of humanitarian entrants in terms of education, skills and previous employment were unable to find employment, left disappointed that their settlement experience was not making them progress to achieve those high skilled and high paying jobs that would have restored their economic and social status and that of their families.

## **Recommendations 14**

14.1 NSW government establishes skills and qualifications recognition service to ensure that migrants including humanitarian entrants who come to Australia can have their skills and qualification recognised. This should include access to funds to cover costs. This service could be similar to the 1994-2004 NSW Government funded Specialist Migrant Placement Program (SMPP).

14.2 NSW government establishes a working group involving TAFE, industry and employment recruitment representatives to develop a mechanism to assist humanitarian entrants overcome industry and market barriers that hinder them from finding employment in the industry of their expertise at a level commensurate to their previous level of employment.

## **9. Gaining acceptance and recognition of the host community in particular the local host community**

The last domain in the settlement journey is gaining the acceptance and recognition of the host community. It should also focus on helping humanitarian entrants and refugees to

accept their host community. Refugees and humanitarian entrants are very eager on arrival to be part of the new community and embrace it. Refugees and humanitarian entrants are the most grateful of migrants on arrival as they understand the privilege that they are afforded. It can be overwhelming for refugees to comprehend how a country like Australia could give them a second chance in life.

It is difficult to gauge the level of welcome when a cohort of humanitarian entrants arrives. Although the level of support for the extra intake of humanitarian entrants from Syria and Iraq in 2015 seemed to be high as images of children drawing flooded television screens, it was not clear how much support was out there once humanitarian entrants from Syria and Iraq started to arrive. Some Australian media outlets focused on the fact that the newly arrived humanitarian entrants were receiving income support while they were learning to communicate in English. The message was that refugees were a burden on society.

Another indication of how some sections in the community felt about the Syrian and Iraqi humanitarian entrants was when the then NSW opposition leader said in 2018 that white Anglo Australians were fleeing suburbs in western Sydney that were settling large numbers of humanitarian entrants from Syria and Iraq.<sup>29</sup> The comments were in response to ABS data showing that Anglo Australian families have moved out of some Western Sydney suburbs and at the same time people born overseas moved into those suburbs.

Although some Australians are not accepting of migrants, border closure in 2020 and 2021 had demonstrated that migrants including refugees play an important role in sustaining the Australia economy and the standard of living enjoyed by Australian born. Currently, the Australian government is being called upon to reopen the migration program as soon as possible to enable businesses to fill vacant employment places that cannot be filled.

Humanitarian entrants and refugees are often saddened when they learn that the wider community does not accept them. It is not clear what the NSW government is doing to promote the acceptance of refugees and humanitarian entrants.

Australian First Nations are not involved in settlement planning or implementation, even though new arrivals are settling on their Country. In rural and regional areas, this has caused tensions between Aboriginal and refugee young people to the extent, that physical altercations occurred.

## **Recommendation 15**

15.1 Multicultural NSW review its community cohesion strategy and ensure that the strategy emphasis a proactive approach to community cohesion rather than the often-reactive response taken in the past. Governments at all levels need to actively promote the

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<sup>29</sup> Sas, N. and Gerathy, S. "NSW Labor Leader Luke Foley Apologies for 'Whit flight' comments as Pauline Hanson Backs Him." ABC News. 24 May 2018. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-24/foley-apologises-for-white-flight-comments/9796548>. Also see Davies, A. "Luke Foley Apologies for 'White flight' Comment Saying Now He Knows it is Offensive." The Guardian. 24 May 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/may/24/luke-foley-defends-white-flight-comment-but-denies-dog-whistling>.

acceptance of refugees and humanitarian entrants. This will ensure that social cohesion is sustained for the good of the whole community.

15.2 Local Aboriginal Land Councils need to be involved in settlement planning initiatives particularly in rural and regional areas as equal partners. All new arrivals need to be educated about Aboriginal history and culture with particular focus on the areas they are settling in, and if possible, Welcome to Country should be an essential element of settlement. Welcome to Country has a significant symbolic meaning and can facilitate connection to the settlement region for new arrivals thus enhancing their wellbeing.

## 10. Conclusion

RCAN has provided a new perspective on the concept of settlement journey. A working definition was provided. Settlement Journey domains were identified which provided a framework for discussion and recommendations.

What makes this submission powerful and unique is that it captures the perspectives of people with refugee lived experience. The refugee lived experience emphasises the agency of refugees while engaging with the challenges refugees face as they settle into their new life. The main point that this submission makes is that there is an urgent need to move away from conceptualising settlement from the needs analysis perspective to the settlement journey perspective. The settlement journey perspective places settlement in its widest context and see refugees as people with agency who aspire to achieve self-determined settlement outcomes. Therefore, the role of settlement policy is to understand those self-determined settlement outcomes and work with refugees to build on their agency to enable them to move towards achieving those self-determine settlement outcomes or settlement aspirations whatever they are.

RCAN hopes that this submission has provide a new perspective that will make a positive impact on the NSW Settlement Strategy being developed.