



Refugee Council of Australia

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

SUBMISSION ON THE SETTLEMENT ENGAGEMENT AND TRANSITION SUPPORT DISCUSSION PAPER

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the national umbrella body for refugees, people seeking asylum and the organisations and individuals who work with them, representing over 190 organisations and 1,000 individual members. RCOA promotes the adoption of humane, lawful and constructive policies by governments and communities in Australia and internationally towards refugees, people seeking asylum 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 represents organisational members who provide programs under Settlement Grants program, covering every State and Territory, as well as refugee communities receiving support through this program.

RCOA welcomes the opportunity to provide our feedback on the Settlement Grants program. The Settlement Grants program provides vital funding to organisations for programs which assist new arrivals to become self-reliant and participate equitably in Australian society as soon as possible after arrival.

1. Findings from the 2017 evaluation

- 1.1. In August 2017, the University of New South Wales Social Policy Research Centre released its evaluation report of the Settlement Grants program.¹ It found that the Settlement Grants “program occupies a critical space by providing culturally appropriate support to eligible migrants in Australia. These supports include practical assistance, information, referrals, opportunities for social participation and support to achieve the three Es.” In line with RCOA’s view, the evaluation found that the “flexibility of the program is a key strength that allowed SPs to tailor services to client and community needs.”
- 1.2. The report found that the following areas of the program work well:
 - Most service providers thought that the program was flexible enough to deliver support in culture-specific contexts, and to respond to specific client needs
 - The eligibility period of five years after arrival was enough for most clients
 - Most services are well-integrated with mainstream services
 - There were good outcomes in the government priorities of ‘the three Es’ (English, employment and education)
 - Most clients were satisfied with the program, and how it had helped them integrate into life in Australia.
- 1.3. The report also identified areas for improvement.

¹ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getfacts/settlement/livinghere/sqp-evaluation/>

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- **Funding:** most service providers reported that there was not enough funding
- **Access to services:** some groups of people with high needs were not supported, either because they were not eligible or there was no clear pathway for support
- **Ongoing support:** some clients need assistance beyond five years
- **Service structure:** there is some overlap between the four service streams, with ethno-specific organisations missing out on significant funding
- **Program structure:** the program lacks clear guidance concerning the required outcomes and the priority areas for settlement in the National Settlement Framework.

1.4. Key recommendations of the report were:

- **Meeting client needs:** consider creating a medium level of support for clients whose needs fall between the intensive case management of Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) and Complex Case Support (CCS) and the low-intensity Settlement Grants program
- **Service structure:** consolidate the four service streams into two. These could be the individual stream (focusing on a life course approach and tailored responses) and the community stream (building the capacity and reach of ethno-specific organisations)
- **Eligibility:** research how to best meet the needs of clients who require support after five years, balanced against the goal that the program should encourage self-reliance. The solution may be an approach independent of the Settlement Grants program
- **Collaboration:** strengthen links between the Settlement Grants program and mainstream services on the policy level, to encourage giving vulnerable migrants higher priority across the range of services (for example, Jobactive)
- **Program structure:** clarify program objectives and how to measure outcomes. While the framework should not be prescriptive so service providers can be responsive, clearer guidelines can improve the provision of services. Greater opportunities for providers to share best practice can also encourage innovation in the field
- **Data Exchange (DEX) and monitoring:** improve the evidence base, through increased guidance for service providers in using the DEX system.

1.5. The report concluded that the program occupies an important space in the range of available services. It found that the program generally meets the needs of eligible migrant groups in Australia. However, changes could help make sure that the program works most effectively towards its goal of cultivating social and economic wellbeing, independence and community integration.

1.6. RCOA broadly supports these findings and recommendations. However, we have further recommendations which are detailed below.

2. Program design

2.1. Currently, the Settlement Grants program has four services areas:

- Casework, coordination and settlement service delivery
- Community coordination and development
- Youth settlement services
- Support for ethno-specific services/communities

2.2. The Discussion Paper, and the UNSW evaluation, proposes that the current four areas be condensed into two:

- **Client services** that adopt a life course approach to casework based on client needs with providers assessing and prioritising clients for support.

- **Capacity building in communities** including support for ethno-specific organisations.
- 2.3. RCOA is broadly favourable to these two streams. We acknowledge and reiterate the discussion paper's view that "services for youth is considered critical and will be retained as a policy priority." It is important that this priority does not get lost within the two new streams. The two broad categories must be flexible enough to ensure organisations can continue and build upon the youth-specific work they do.
 - 2.4. While we recognise that the evaluation found that "although a youth focus was an important component of the SG program, there are other critical life stages when clients required tailored settlement-related support", we believe that youth specific programs play an especially important role in supporting young people to settle into Australian life, setting them up for success for the rest of their life.

Recommendation 1

The Settlement Grants program should retain its flexible funding model to ensure that organisations are able to offer specialised, innovative and individualised support to refugee communities.

Recommendation 2

The Settlement Grants program should continue to recognise the importance of youth-specific settlement services by acknowledging these services in the two program areas. This can include a sub-group for youth specific client services and capacity building, and separate funding allocation for youth specific services.

3. Support for ethno-specific refugee community organisations

- 3.1. Refugee communities provide a crucial role in the settlement of refugees and humanitarian entrants. Both refugee community organisations and tireless individuals play an essential, yet underappreciated, in helping people navigate the complex challenges of finding their way in a new country, especially in the early stages of settlement.
- 3.2. RCOA's previous report, *The Strength Within*, highlighted the vital yet often invisible roles refugee community-based organisations play in the settlement of community members in Australia.² As that report identifies, these organisations play an important role in supporting the social participation, economic wellbeing, independence, personal wellbeing, life satisfaction and community connectedness of new refugee communities. However, their major role in settlement, and in promoting development in their home countries, is all too often neglected and unfunded.
- 3.3. In the context of forced migration, it is natural for refugee communities in host countries to seek what is familiar to them in order to build bridges that help them understand their new reality drawing strength from their shared experiences, language and cultural understandings. The loss of self-determination often drives people to seek a sense of belonging and internal strength, which fosters the development of refugee community-based organisations. This is also promoted by the high level of volunteering and a genuine desire to give back to other new arrivals and the broader Australian community.
- 3.4. In that report, RCOA emphasised the need to recognise the role of refugee communities as a vital aspect of the settlement process for new arrivals and as instrumental in international development. Our recommendations included undertaking further research on the roles played by such organisations, their challenges and how they can be strengthened, and the development of a strategy for supporting, strengthening and incorporating them into the National Settlement Framework. As well, it was recommended that funding bodies should consider ways to support such organisations; policy-makers should consider ways of

²Refugee Council of Australia, *The Strength within: The Role of Refugee Community Organisations in Settlement* (May 2014) http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/rpt/1405_StrengthWithin.pdf. These are defined as any group, association or structure that is created by refugee and humanitarian entrants for the benefit of their own self-defined cultural community.

critically engaging with them; and there should be consideration of initiatives to build capacity to support the development of leaders and robust community structures.

- 3.5. Many refugee community organisations exist entirely through the dedication and fundraising of those driving the organisations, as funding is extremely limited. One of the few sources of support for refugee community-based organisation is the Settlement Grants program. However, over the years, RCOA has observed that the funding for ethno-specific community organisations has decreased in this program, undermining a vital source of support for refugees. Further, RCOA also observes that funding and recognition of ethnic community organisations varies widely between States and Territories, and that this is a significant factor in their viability and strength.
- 3.6. RCOA further agrees with the evaluation report that “it is important that an emphasis on leadership training and mentoring is retained, with a view to building ethno-specific services/communities’ independence.” Where established settlement organisations are supporting ethno-specific community groups through Settlement Grants funding, this should ultimately aim to support these groups to become self-reliant, thereby enabling them to receive funding as an independent ethno-specific organisation. This can be modelled on the Victorian Government’s Refugee Action Program.³

Recommendation 3

The Australian Government should increase the level of funding available to refugee community-based organisations, including from within the Settlement Grants program. This should include earmarked funding set aside for ethno-specific community organisations to build towards self-reliance and community led-initiatives. This would be available for ethno-specific organisations to with the support of Settlement Grant providers as part of their capacity building work. This can be modelled on the Victorian Government Refugee Action Program.

4. Eligibility for the Settlement Grants program

- 4.1. The DSS discussion paper notes that the “migration streams currently eligible for the program and five-year timeframe will be unchanged however the program will be more clearly positioned as a needs based program.” RCOA is disappointed that Settlement Grants funding will not be extended to other refugee communities, especially those on Temporary Protection Visas (TPV) and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEV).
- 4.2. For a number of years, RCOA has highlighted the additional barriers that refugees on TPVs and SHEVs face in their settlement journey. RCOA’s organisation members continue to raise concerns regarding the lack of settlement services for people on TPVs and SHEVs, including during RCOA’s Annual Consultations. Service providers expressed concern that the lack of support services will hinder settlement outcomes and create prolonged issues. As one member highlighted in RCOA’s Annual Consultations:

We believe it is counter-productive to restrict access to settlement support services for temporary humanitarian visa holders, as this will significantly inhibit the settlement of these visa holders and create additional difficulties for them and for services working with them over the longer term. It is likely to place increased pressure on the few services those on temporary humanitarian visas will have access to, such as torture and trauma survivor rehabilitation services, and services may need to expand their activities beyond what they are funded for in order to try and fill the gap in service provision. It will also put pressure on unfunded refugee community organisations.

- 4.3. Services providers noted that preventing access to basic services will further hinder employment outcomes, costing the government more in terms of welfare payments and other vital services:

³ <https://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/images/stories/pdf/refugee%20action%20program%20summary%20document.pdf>

People are talking about employment, I'm not sure if they're including refugees on TPVs in that discussion. But just the fact that TPVs aren't eligible for [settlement services]. I think it's a really alarming thing. Previously from our experience of service 866 visa holders, the issues we face would presumably be the same as TPV holders and they can be quite complex ... The lack of access to [support] services, it really leads to undue pressure on other services such as crisis services. If you don't have that initial support or ongoing support, I think that just leads to crisis. That is really undesirable ... We will spend the money now, or spend the money later on crises

- 4.4. RCOA reiterates the need for TPV and SHEV holders to have access to settlement services, including Settlement Grants. The exclusion of this group is counterproductive, short-sighted and harmful.
- 4.5. RCOA has also previously stressed the need for the Settlement Grants program to be extended to people beyond the five-year time limit. RCOA continues to hear from refugee communities and service providers about the ongoing needs of some refugee communities beyond five years of arrivals. We reiterate the need for Settlement Grants to be flexible and individualised, and for the program to support those beyond the five-year time-limit where needed. Settlement Grants should be based on an individual assessment of a person's needs, and where they require ongoing settlement support, this should be provided beyond the five-year limit.

Recommendation 4

The Settlement Grants program eligibility should be extended to people on TPVs and SHEVs.

Recommendation 5

The Settlement Grants program five-year time limit should be replaced with a needs based assessment model based on individual circumstances and settlement needs.

5. Key priorities and the three E's

- 5.1. The DSS discussion paper asks for feedback on how the Settlement Grants program can further drive the "three Es" – English, employment and education. As RCOA has previously stressed, we are concerned that an over-emphasis on these three areas are likely to undermine other important settlement areas. Indeed, the Settlement Grants program is not, and was not intended to be, an employment, English or education focused program. Rather, SGP builds the foundations of health, housing, social engagement, financial and computer literacy needed in order to eventually support the three Es. The Settlement Grants program is designed to deliver flexible and holistic settlement support to refugee communities. While some of this will rightfully include employment, education and English support, an overemphasis of this area may lead to less focus on other support.
- 5.2. The "three Es" are already covered under other government services, and primary responsibility for these goals should rest with these services. RCOA believes that more need to be done to improve these existing services, rather than trying to make every settlement service responsible for delivering the three Es.
- 5.3. This is especially true with Jobactive, the Government's employment service, which is currently failing a large number of refugee and humanitarian entrants.⁴ The Government's priorities would be better served by improving the Jobactive program, rather than trying to make the Settlement Grants program also deliver employment outcomes. Likewise, the AMEP is already designed to deliver English outcomes.

⁴ See RCOA's report 'Not Working: Experiences of refugees and migrants with Jobactive', available at <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/publications/reports/jobactive/>

The Settlement Grants program should remain a holistic and broad-based settlement service. While this includes a support for English, employment and education, it should not come at the cost of other vital settlement supports.

6. Community of Practice and Collaboration

- 6.1. RCOA welcomes the proposal to develop a Community of Practice to share innovative ideas and best practice between service providers to further support refugee communities. RCOA has been highlighting innovative programs in refugee settlement through our Bright Ideas feature.⁵ Bright Ideas highlights innovative programs, initiatives and projects developed to support refugees and asylum seekers. It provides a way to share ideas, success stories and good practice to improve service provision and assist organisations and communities in addressing key issues and challenges. Likewise, other organisations and peak bodies also already share best practice.
- 6.2. RCOA suggests that funding be provided to service providers in order to carry out evaluations of their programs, produce reports, and widely share their findings. This should be shared publically, beyond the Settlement Grants providers, so that other organisations who are not receiving Settlement Grants funding can learn from this experience. This is especially needed for smaller organisations, who may not have capacity to carry out these evaluations independently.
- 6.3. RCOA also recommends that services be encouraged to regularly meet up and share best practice between each other, especially through face-to-face forums. The need for regular face-to-face meetings has been highlighted to RCOA by a number of Settlement Grants providers. While this often happens at a local level with local settlement planning committees, it should take place on a state-based or even national level. Funding should be allocated to provide support for these types of face-to-face events.

Recommendation 6

Funding should be allocated for program evaluations and dissemination of findings to highlight best practice amongst the sector. Further funding should also be allocated to facilitate regular forums to support providers to meet each other and develop stronger networks.

⁵ Available online: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/our-work/publications/bright-ideas/>