

become a refugee welcome zone leadership council



refugee
welcome
zones



Refugee Council
of Australia

www.refugeecouncil.org.au

introduction

Refugee Welcome Zones are an initiative of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), which is the peak body for refugees and organisations working with refugees in Australia. There are currently 165 Local Government Areas in Australia that have declared themselves Refugee Welcome Zones (46% of LGAs nationally), making a public commitment to:

- welcome refugees into the community,
- uphold the human rights of refugees,
- demonstrate compassion for refugees and
- enhance cultural and religious diversity in the community.

By making this declaration, local councils are encouraged in their continuing efforts to support the people who make the difficult journey to Australia to seek protection. While there are no financial or legal obligations conferred on Councils who declare themselves a Refugee Welcome Zone (RWZ), Councils are encouraged to implement policies, programs or practices most appropriate for their area in order to meet the spirit of the declaration.

RCOA has received feedback indicating Councils would like more opportunities to engage with RCOA staff as Refugee Welcome Zones, access useful information and learn about successful initiatives and programs being implemented across the network.

In response, RCOA is looking to harness the support of interested RWZ Councils to enable us to develop the initiative further. RCOA is calling for expressions of interest from Councils interested in becoming Refugee Welcome Zone Leadership Councils, to support RCOA to further enhance the activities of the Refugee Welcome Zone network and provide increased value for Councils and the communities they serve.

acknowledging the contribution of refugees and enhancing social cohesion

Local Government has historically played an important role in assisting refugee settlement and promoting community harmony. Since federation, Australia has become home to over 900,000 refugees and we have a proud history of settling refugees from all over the world who have gone on to make an enormous contribution to our economic, social and cultural wellbeing.

“Getting laws and policies right is vital. But its local people and communities that are on the frontlines when refugees arrive, and whose welcome makes the difference – the difference between rejection and inclusion, between despair and hope.”

Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

The Refugee Welcome Zone initiative was born out of recognition of the importance of creating a culture of welcome for refugees and designed to encourage local authorities to acknowledge the positive contribution refugees make to society and harmony, social cohesion and respect for human rights and dignity in the local community.

When a Council become a Refugee Welcome Zone, they make a public commitment to welcome refugees into the community, encourage empathy and understanding and promote positive attitudes towards refugees. This commitment to welcome refugees sends a positive message throughout the community, raises awareness and highlights the good work of Councils who are involved in implementing a range of policies, programs and activities to build more inclusive and socially cohesive communities.



working on policy areas of interest to local government

RCOA has been working to provide a voice for refugees and organisations working with refugees since 1981, providing expert policy analysis, recommendations and advocacy for fair and sustainable refugee policies. RCOA currently has 180 organisational members and is in touch with the concerns of its members across the country who are supporting and providing front-line services to refugees.

RCOA engages in research and advocacy on many policy areas of interest to local government, and publishes reports and policy briefs on a comprehensive range of issues, including:

- The situation for people seeking asylum living in the Australian community. The recent changes to the Federal Government's Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) for people seeking asylum, has led to increased burden on local and State governments and local community organisations. RCOA is engaged in advocacy on this issue and has produced a range of resources, statistics and research that can be used by Councils to inform their staff and their own advocacy efforts.
- The situation for refugees granted Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs) who are living in the Australian community but who are not entitled to the same services and supports as resettled refugees, including access to English lessons, further education or family reunion.
- Promotion of an alternative model of community sponsorship of refugees, RCOA is one of the lead partner organisations in the Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (CRSI) which is calling for a sponsorship program based on the best aspects of Canada's highly successful private sponsorship program as an alternative to the Federal Government's problematic Community Sponsorship Program. This would give more opportunity for local communities to sponsor refugees to Australia, including regional areas looking to attract migrants.
- The support needs for newly arrived refugees with a disability, and gaps in service provision.
- Analysis of the Federal Budget and its implications for refugees and people seeking asylum.
- Research and reports on employment and effectiveness of job agencies in assisting refugees.

seeking the support of leadership councils to strengthen the network

RCOA receives its funding through public donations and membership payments, enabling RCOA to be an independent community voice on refugee policy. As an independent, non-government organisation, RCOA is seeking the support of local governments who believe in the importance of welcoming refugees, acknowledging the contribution they make to the community and wish to support independent advocacy on refugee issues. This support would enable RCOA to provide:

- Opportunities for increased interaction and engagement with RCOA staff such as access to webinars and teleconferences regarding key areas of refugee policy
- Resources detailing successful and innovative initiatives being implemented by Councils and examples of good practice
- Increased recognition and promotion of the positive work of Leadership Councils via our website, including the profiling of RWZs, articles in newsletters and social media
- Specialised resources to assist Councils such as fact sheets, policy briefs, case studies, statistics, reports, media toolkits and other publications
- An annual RWZ forum, to be held alongside the annual Local Government Association conference



- Support for local Councils' advocacy for policy improvements, including increased resources from State and Federal Governments, recognising the importance of local government as outlined in the National Settlement Framework
- Opportunity for Councils to be actively involved in the direction of the initiative.

It is proposed that RWZ Leadership Councils would contribute to RCOA's resourcing of the initiative through an annual membership payment of:

- **\$5,000 for Councils with a population of more than 100,000**
- **\$2,500 for Councils with a population of less than 100,000**

In joining the RWZ Leadership Group, Councils will be contributing to the ongoing strength and direction of the initiative, enabling RCOA to provide greater support for the initiative and ultimately enhancing social cohesion and inclusion across our communities.

From the local to the global: providing opportunities to connect and showcase achievements on the international level

There is increasing international recognition of the importance of local authorities and city networks in welcoming and sheltering displaced populations around the world. RCOA, through its partnership with UNHCR, can provide interested Councils with opportunities to connect at the international level with initiatives such as the landmark Global Forum on Refugees, taking place in December 2019 at the United Nations in Geneva.

The Global Compact on Refugees, affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018* and endorsed by Australia, calls for the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including local authorities, to address the global refugee crisis. One year after the historic affirmation of the Global Compact on Refugees, the first Global Refugee Forum is a platform for States and other actors to make pledges and contributions to strengthen the collective response to refugee situations. It will also be an opportunity to highlight key achievements and exchange good practices, including those of local governments.

importance of showing solidarity and as global displacement at record high

There are now over 70 million displaced people in the world, half of whom are children. As forced displacement increases, the importance of showing solidarity with refugees will only grow. Now more than ever we need to work together to send a positive, inclusive message about the contribution of refugees, to increase awareness and understanding of why people become refugees, and why they have come to Australia.

We hope that as Councils that have pledged to welcome refugees into your communities, you share this vision and will consider becoming a RWZ Leadership Council to further support the important work that needs to be done in creating a culture of welcome and understanding for those displaced by war and persecution.

register your interest

To register your interest or to seek further information please contact **Rebecca Langton** at RCOA's Sydney office on (02) 9211 9333 or email manager@refugeecouncil.org.au



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