

# Victorian Multicultural Commission submission on Australia's 2022-23 Humanitarian Program

# Introduction

**The Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Commonwealth Government's 2022-23 Humanitarian Program.**

This brief submission covers the following:

1. support to increase the Humanitarian Program to 27,000 places.
2. support to enhance and increase the community refugee sponsorship models
3. resolve the TPV/SHEV legacy and transition to permanent residency
4. The importance of an adequately resourced, well-coordinated and a needs and outcomes based settlement support system that also strengthens community capacity
5. the important role that immigration plays in nation building
6. the call to strengthen multicultural affairs and social cohesion

## 1. Humanitarian Program

### 1.1 Size of the Humanitarian Program

The VMC supports the Commonwealth Government's commitment to progressively increase the Humanitarian Program (HP) to 27,000 places per year. That the HP be restored to the 20,000 places per annum that it was reduced from as soon as possible and subsequently increase the intake incrementally to 27,000 places per annum.

### 1.2 Community Sponsorship

The VMC welcomes the Commonwealth Government's commitment to improving and expanding the community refugee sponsorship model, including the need to ensure that the costs associated with applications being minimised. While garnering additional support from the community is welcome, the Commonwealth needs to retain a flexible needs-based approach to settlement and ensure that a safety net remains to ensure positive settlement outcomes. The intake through this component should also be considered in addition to the HP intake target of 27,000 persons per annum.

### 1.3 Resolving TPV/SHEV and transition to permanent residency

A large number of community members and organisations have raised concerns about the situation of TPV/SHEV visa holders over many years. Many have spent years in Australia with their residency status in limbo. The worsening humanitarian situation in places like Afghanistan and in Burma/Myanmar has made the situation even more precarious.

For instance, many international students from Burma/Myanmar on bridging visas are at risk of being persecuted if they were to return due to their involvement in campaigns locally. The growing sentiment amongst the community is that many of these asylum seekers may experience the same terrible situation other asylum seekers have faced, such as detention.

Granting permanent residency, providing full access to settlement support services, healthcare (Medicare), social services and disability services (NDIS) and enabling them to sponsor their families after years of separation is just and in line with Australia's humanitarian obligations.

## 1.4 Legal Funding

The provision of appropriate legal funding is immeasurably important to ensure that people understand their rights and responsibilities and their ability to present their case.

## 1.5 Family Reunion

Equitable access to family reunion and providing an additional allocation of places is critically important to assisting successful settlement. This is a critical issue for the community as many people, having spent a decade in Australia, are still unable to sponsor their family members. Some of these people cannot travel outside Australia to visit their family members, as doing so would breach their temporary visas meaning they wouldn't be able to return to Australia.

## 1.6 Onshore vs Offshore

The importance of de-linking the onshore and offshore components to mitigate against tensions arising between communities. The acceptance of onshore applicants should not impact on Australia's offshore humanitarian commitments and obligations.

# 2. Settlement Assistance

Australia has a comparatively successful settlement program however it is imperative that these services are improved, integrated, evidentiary based and coordinated, particularly in partnership with State/Territory governments, service providers and importantly co-designed and delivered with the community.

Settlement:

- services need to be needs and outcome based and not be constrained by arbitrary time limits
- is non-linear: humanitarian entrants and migrants do not necessarily progress through services sequentially. They may access services concurrently and/or may need to leave a service and then re-engage at a later date.
- is multifaceted and complex: The needs and barriers faced by humanitarian entrants and migrants may vary considerably and require a range of mainstream and targeted settlement support and services. Additional services may be required during the settlement process for those facing particular vulnerabilities, including refugees due to their often difficult pre-arrival experiences, children, young people, women and the elderly. Services should be available, accessible, timely and culturally appropriate.
- Provide options for applicants to show their ability that they are able to get a job soon after arrival or to demonstrate that they have assets to support themselves in Australia in the interim.
- Consider the applicant's family as a whole unit i.e. if they have an 18-year-old child s/he will soon be able to join workforce too along with her/his parents.
- Allow applicants to apply directly to the Department like SHP applicants by removing APOs as people are now paying double fees to migration agents and APOs.
- Humanitarian entrants have a very difficult time renting their first home in Australia given they do not have a rental history. The Government needs to incentivise the real estate agents/landlords to rent out their properties to these people.

The National Settlement Framework that was developed in partnership with all jurisdictions, following community consultations, over ten years ago (originally through the then Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (MCIMA)) identified the following nine priority areas:

Education and Training	Employment	Civic Participation
Housing	Family and Social Support	Health and Wellbeing
Language Services	Transport	Justice

Each of these areas are critically important in delivering successful settlement outcomes and if incorporated well will deliver social, cultural and economic benefits for not only the humanitarian entrants but also for the nation as a whole.

## 2.1 Strengthening and empowering communities Improved data collection

Community organisations and leaders are trusted sources and often the first point of contact and need to be better utilised by governments and service providers. Communities can be better engaged and supported to facilitate settlement, enhance capacity and improve participation (social, cultural & economic). The following needs be considered:

- Funding positions within the community to build capacity and engagement similar to the Grant-in-Aid roles funded by the Commonwealth in the 1980's and 1990's (following the independent, ground-breaking and comprehensive Galbally review of 1978) and more recently with the funding provided to Afghan and Ukrainian communities. In part these positions will both facilitate navigation through the various systems and services as well as provide advice and guidance to service providers and agencies
- The role of ethno-specific, faith-based and multicultural agencies need to be seen as complementary to mainstream service delivery
- Cultural competency of and inclusion within generalist service providers including their workforce diversity.

## 2.2 Improved data collection

There is a need for improved multicultural data collection to provide the evidentiary base to guide policies, programs and service delivery. This has been called for by the community for many decades.

It is important to note that *The Guide: Implementing the Standards for Statistics on Cultural and Language Diversity* developed in 2011 by the Commonwealth Interdepartmental Committee on Multicultural Affairs has not been implemented. The Commonwealth's commitment to collect better data is most welcome.

## 2.3 Reforming citizenship application process

Community members have raised the following three main concerns regarding citizenship applications:

1. Lengthy duration: it takes many years (in some cases close to a decade) for citizenship applications to be finalised. Community members have stated that when they contact the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), they receive no meaningful update with DHA advising them to just wait.
2. Unrealistic Documentation Requests: in many cases, DHA requests documents that many community members, especially humanitarian visa holders, are not able to provide.
3. Value Questions: the addition of value questions to the citizenship test means that many applicants cannot pass the test even if they achieve a very high score. This is because answering one value question incorrectly will result in failing the test. It is important to note most applicants who answer the value questions incorrectly do so not because they do not believe in those values, but because they have low levels of English proficiency.

There is an urgent need for a review and, subject to that review, a reform of the citizenship application process. Critical to this is the need to better resource DHA to ensure a more efficient and fairer pathway to citizenship. While there is a need to protect the citizenship application process with appropriate security checks we must not lose sight of what citizenship means to both the nation and the broader community and the many migrants and humanitarian entrants – strengthening the sense of belonging and acceptance, improving the appreciation of rights and responsibilities and the commitment to Australia and ability to better appreciate and participate within its democratic

### 3. Immigration as a Nation Building program

Migration has been integral to the economic, social and cultural development of Australia, making us a richer society and more competitive on a global market. There are considerable social, cultural and economic benefits arising from our immigration program including offsetting our ageing population, productivity gains, providing skills and qualifications for which the nation has not had to pay for, establishing businesses and providing trade, educational, artistic and tourism links with their respective countries of origin as documented in various reports including:

- the *2021 Intergenerational Report*<sup>1</sup>
- CEDA's *2021 Migration Report*<sup>2</sup>
- Migration Council of Australia's *The Economic Impact of Migration*.<sup>3</sup>

Importantly, our success in developing a relatively successful multicultural and socially cohesive society has been the product of a combination of factors including collaborative leadership at the political and community levels, and a range of targeted policies, programs and legislation, designed to facilitate inclusion, equality of opportunity and access and a sense of belonging.

The VMC supports the Federal Government's public statements that immigration should be considered within the context of it being a *Nation Building* program.

#### 3.1 Regional Settlement

The Commonwealth's immigration program, with support from states, has always had as one of its objectives the encouragement of regional settlement. However, this objective has always run against an overarching and overwhelming trend of urbanisation (historically, globally and locally) that has taken place both over time over due to a range of factors. To illustrate an existing trend, Australia's capital cities' share of the population has increased between the 2006 Census and the 2021 Census from 63.7% to 66.9%.

There is a window of opportunity for genuine nation/state building over a period of some decades. It's also an opportunity to re-garner trust with the public but only if it is entered with an honesty and a comprehensive vision of the necessity and a clear outline of what benefits it will deliver to all of us, both now and for future generations.

The vision needs to be comprehensive and cover everything from housing and transport infrastructure to economic investment and tax incentives, from the redistribution of population over time to environmental and climate change factors.

With respect to settlement of humanitarian program entrants in regional locations, it is imperative that the appropriate level of settlement services and supports are in place including appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> The *2021 Intergenerational Report*<sup>1</sup> [https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-06/p2021\\_182464.pdf](https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-06/p2021_182464.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> CEDA's *2021 Migration Report*<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ceda.com.au/Admin/getmedia/150315bf-cceb-4536-862d-1a3054197cd7/CEDA-Migration-report-26-March-2021-final.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Migration Council of Australia's *The Economic Impact of Migration*<sup>3</sup> <https://migrationcouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-Economic-Impact-of-Migration.pdf>

health and mental health services, affordable housing availability, employment, education and economic opportunities as well as ensuring that the local services providers and communities are prepared in welcoming new arrivals.

### Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC)

Established in 1983 and now constituted under the *Multicultural Victoria Act (2011)*, the VMC is a statutory body dedicated to promoting diversity across all areas of society and advocating on behalf of multicultural communities.

As an important conduit between communities and government, the VMC engages with multicultural and multifaith groups to understand the issues, challenges and opportunities that they face. The VMC undertakes regular consultations with multicultural communities, including through its network of eight Regional Advisory Councils across the state (with over 200 members), the Multifaith Advisory Group, which includes peak religious bodies in Victoria and its Multicultural Chamber of Commerce Group.

Further information on the VMC is available through its website:

<https://www.multiculturalcommission.vic.gov.au/>

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this submission, please do not hesitate to reach out to the VMC Chairperson, Vivienne Nguyen on 0448 718 668 or via email at [vivienne.nguyen@vmc.vic.gov.au](mailto:vivienne.nguyen@vmc.vic.gov.au) or the VMC's Executive Senior Adviser, Hakan Akyol on 0412 265 860 or via email at [hakan.akyol@vmc.vic.gov.au](mailto:hakan.akyol@vmc.vic.gov.au).

Yours sincerely



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