



**Submission on
Australia's Humanitarian Program 2023-2024**

May 2023

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Acknowledgement of Country

SSI acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to Country.

Background

SSI welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Department of Home Affairs on Australia's Humanitarian Program 2023-2024.

SSI is a national non-for-profit organisation that delivers a range of human services that connect individuals, families, and children from diverse backgrounds with opportunities – including settlement support, disability programs, community engagement initiatives and training and employment pathways. At the heart of everything we do is a drive for equality, empathy, and celebration of every individual.

SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic (CALD) backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas.

In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria, providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. In FY2022, SSI supported nearly 50,000 clients across more than 49 programs and community-based services. We are also a leading provider of evidence-based insights] into the social sector and are known as an organisation that can reach communities considered by many to be hard to reach.

SSI is the largest provider in NSW of the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP), funded by the Australian Government, to newly arrived refugees and other humanitarian entrants. It also leads a consortium, the NSW Settlement Partnership, of more than 20 partner agencies which deliver the Settlement Engagement and Transition Supports (SETS) program, also funded by the Australian Government, to refugees and eligible family stream migrants across NSW. SSI is also one of 11 Approved Proposing Organisations in the Community Support Program, liaising with local communities to identify people to propose for a humanitarian visa, conducting relevant screening and coordinating the visa application process and assurance over the provision of settlement services.

Settlement services have seen first-hand the impacts of the pandemic locally during the past three years. This included supporting humanitarian entrants in Australia at a time when the Humanitarian Program had virtually ceased due to travel restrictions on non-resident arrivals. Settlement services have also been at the forefront of the response to support people who were evacuated from Afghanistan after the conflict there escalated, and more recently we have adapted to respond to the influx of arrivals from the conflict in Ukraine. These responses entailed working flexibly and often outside of the scope of HSP service delivery and demanded intensive support and long hours for SSI staff.

SSI has valued the relationship with the Government in responding flexibly to new conflicts and looks forward to continuing to do this in response to new global crises such as in the Sudan. We were pleased to see the Government's commitment to increase the humanitarian intake over time. SSI also welcomes the Government's 2023-24 Budget measure to remove the 5-year maximum duration of eligibility for services under the SETS.

SSI has actively contributed to the review of the settlement services model and we look forward to working collaboratively with the Government to implement the new model.

Australia's role as a resettlement country

According to the UNHRC projections, more than two million refugees will need resettlement in 2023.¹ This is 36 per cent higher than resettlement needs in 2022, due to the humanitarian impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the multitude of protracted refugee situations, and the emergence of new displacement situations over the past year. There are, for example, currently 4.3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance from South Sudan. After Syria and Afghanistan, it is the third largest refugee crisis in the world, and 63 percent of South Sudanese refugees are under the age of 18.²

Leading resettlement countries such as the USA and Canada have already increased their refugee intakes for 2023 to 125,000³ and 84,795⁴ respectively.

Despite the growing global need for resettlement places, the size of Australia's Humanitarian Program has remained relatively stagnant for decades. Further, for the past three years Australia's humanitarian intake has not reached the ceiling set in successive Federal Budget cycles. Consequently, there is a large backlog of humanitarian applications pending.

The Government made a welcome commitment in the 2022 Federal Budget to provide additional places over the next four years to the annual humanitarian intake. The Department of Home Affairs discussion paper reiterates the Government's aspiration to increase the humanitarian intake over time. SSI recommends that the Government increase the humanitarian intake from 13,750 places to 27,000 places per year, in line with this commitment.

In increasing the humanitarian intake, we recommend an increase in the proportion of the program drawn from UNHCR referrals, given that these referrals are based on established criteria to identify refugees in need of resettlement.

A scale-up of Australia's Humanitarian Program 2023-24 will assist in meeting the massive shortfall in resettlement places globally, facilitate refugees already resettled in Australia to be re-united with family members and allow Australia to demonstrate its credentials as a strong global citizen.

While the primary objective of the Humanitarian Program is, and should be, to provide safety and a durable solution to people in need of international protection, refugees also make substantial and lasting economic, social and cultural contributions to their new home in Australia. Refugee and humanitarian entrants engage disproportionately in the labour force in some regional areas, and in industries where there are significant labour shortages. Refugees are also much more likely to be entrepreneurial and start their own business than the Australian population as a whole.⁵

The settlement sector has demonstrated its capacity to respond flexibly to support people who were evacuated from Afghanistan and more recently to the influx of arrivals from the conflict in Ukraine.

Recommendation 1: The Australian Government should increase the humanitarian intake for 2023-24 from 13,750 places to 27,000 places per annum.

Expanding complementary pathways

There is widespread recognition globally and locally that there is a need for a broader range of complementary pathways to increase durable solutions, in addition to existing resettlement programs, for the growing number of refugees globally to settle in third countries.

In addition to long-standing resettlement programs, the UNHCR is working to find additional complementary pathways to provide long-term safety to refugees to meet increasing demand. As part of the Global Compact on refugees, members states of the General Assembly committed to increase the availability and predictability of complementary pathways for refugees and ensure that they are made available on a more systematic and sustainable basis and contain appropriate protection safeguards.⁶

Traditional migration pathways contain systematic barriers that prevent refugees from migrating for employment, educational or reunification purposes. Complementary pathways allow refugee resettlement programs to continue their focus on refugees with the greatest need and international partnerships. Long-term safety and needs of other refugee cohorts can be met through additional pathways, reducing pressure on the current system.

Pilot programs such as the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot and the Community Refugee Settlement and Integration Pilot have provided proof of concept that complementary pathways are viable and systemic barriers can be addressed. Lessons from these pilots can inform the design of expanded complementary pathways for refugees going forward.⁷

SSI supports the core principles for complementary programs, which have been developed by the Refugee Council of Australia and the sector:

- **A coherent national approach:** The Australian Government should articulate a coherent national framework for complementary pathways. This should provide a ‘menu of options’ for non-traditional actors to become involved in refugee protection as part of a whole-of-society approach to Australia’s refugee response.⁸
- **Additionality:** admission of refugees through complementary pathways should be additional to that facilitated through the Humanitarian Program.
- **Durability:** Complementary pathways for refugees need to be durable solutions that uphold humanitarian protection principles – i.e., provide a permanent visa or a clear pathway to permanency.
- **Supported settlement and a safety net:** Refugees arriving through complementary migration pathways will have similar experiences and needs to other refugees in navigating life in Australia. Ensuring adequate settlement support is available is imperative. Complementary visa pathways must not diminish government responsibility to provide a safety net of support.
- **Accessibility:** The design of complementary pathways needs to address the barriers that impact on the capacity of refugees to access other migration pathways. This includes, for example: barriers in navigating application processes; prohibitively high costs associated with visa and migration-related fees; and inability to obtain required documentation.⁹

Complementary pathways for skilled refugees

Skilled migration is rarely thought of as a potential pathway for refugees even though there is a critical global need for more durable solutions for refugees and an unprecedented national skills shortage.

While the primary objective of complementary pathways is to provide durable solutions, they also offer benefits to receiving countries. Expanding skilled migration pathways for humanitarian entrants would help address Australia’s critical skills shortages, improve social outcomes for refugees and the community, and promote greater public awareness of, and support for, complementary humanitarian pathways.

Waiving or reducing the visa processing fees for skilled migration pathways for humanitarian entrants is also vital to reduce barriers to accessing these complementary pathways.

Recommendation 2: The Australian Government should increase the quota or expand the pilot for skilled migration pathways for humanitarian entrants.

Recommendation 3: The Australian Government should waive or reduce visa processing fees for skilled migration pathways for humanitarian entrants.

Community sponsorship

The Community Support Program (CSP) model has features that inhibit its potential to capitalise on the capacity and generosity of private individuals and organisations to provide humanitarian protection and post-arrival support to refugees and humanitarian entrants.

The findings of the review of the CSP initiated by the former Minister echoed issues canvassed in the 2019 Shergold review, including concerns that the CSP does not expand the overall number of resettlement places. A key lesson from community sponsorship of refugees globally is that people contributing to and engaged in sponsorship want their efforts to add to a government's existing commitments to refugee resettlement as happened in Canada in response to the Syrian-conflict and the Afghan crises. Sponsors want their contributions and goodwill to add to humanitarian protection.

In response to the CSP review, the former Minister announced that visa costs associated with the program would be significantly reduced. While this was a welcome measure, SSI continues to recommend that there should be no visa application charges for community sponsorship. Community-based organisations and communities themselves are responsible and carry out much of the intensive work in the CSP on a voluntary basis which can be undermined by high visa application charges. Costs for community sponsorship should be shared between community and government, as highlighted by the Shergold Review.

Following the review of the CSP, the Government announced the trial of a new community-supported settlement pathway for refugees, the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP). The establishment of the CRISP pilot is a positive step towards developing a model for community sponsorship of refugees who do not have existing links to Australia. However, the places allocated under the CRISP are not in addition to Australia's existing intake, but instead takes places from within the Humanitarian Program.

Recommendation 4: The Australian Government should ensure that refugees who are privately sponsored to come to Australia through the CSP and the CRISP are allocated places that are additional to the existing Humanitarian Program intake.

Strengthening settlement support for humanitarian entrants

SSI is proud to have delivered strong integration outcomes to humanitarian entrants prior to and during the pandemic which point to the strengths of refugees and the capabilities of Australia's settlement sector. These outcomes have been documented through regular HSP and SETS program reporting, through independent evaluation which SSI commissioned for the delivery of the HSP in Armidale¹⁰ and through research.

Our *Foundations for Belonging* research is carried out with newly arrived refugees in partnership with Western Sydney University. The research explores refugees' social connections, their access to rights and fulfilment of responsibilities to deepen understanding of the social and civic dimensions of integration. The three phases of research, conducted in 2019, 2020 and late 2021, provide evidence of strong settlement and integration outcomes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings demonstrate the strengths and agency of refugees during the pandemic. Refugees' positive feelings about their local community and neighbourhood remained strong and trust in government and the police continued despite stringent public health restrictions. That said, the research found disparities for refugee women in developing social bridges and access to essential services, challenges in terms of digital skills and negative impacts from prolonged family separation, heightened by the pandemic and border restrictions.¹¹

As we emerge from the pandemic, it is critical that newcomers are provided with the right support to reengage in employment and social participation. Successful settlement is also critical to ensuring public support for immigration.

As noted, SSI welcomes the Government's 2023-24 Budget measure to remove the 5-year maximum duration of eligibility for services under the SETS. However, settlement service organisations are already facing acute funding pressures due to increasing staffing and service delivery costs. Adequate resourcing is urgently needed to alleviate these pressures and meet increasing future demand.

Recommendation 5: The Australian Government should ensure that funding of settlement services takes account of increased operational costs and is commensurate with increasing levels of future demand.

Enhancing settlement outcomes in regional communities

The movement of refugees and migrants to regional areas can sustain and grow the population base, bring about economic opportunities, grow and diversify the regional economy and employment base, and create more vibrant and cohesive communities in regional areas. The movement of newcomers to regional areas can alleviate population decline, fill labour shortages and enrich cultural diversity.

In Australia, there is considerable impetus from government and regional communities for increased refugee settlement outside of our major cities. In recent years, the rate of settlement of refugees in regional areas has increased sharply, with more than 20 per cent of refugees settling in regional locations in 2018-19.¹² However, there is limited flexibility in settlement program funding models to tailor support to address constraints in regional areas that impact on refugee settlement, such as access to healthcare, education and affordable, long-term accommodation.

While government policies have helped to increase initial settlement of refugees and migrants in regional areas, retention of newcomers in regional areas remains a challenge.¹³ Analysis by the Grattan Institute shows that when refugees and migrants settle in regional areas, they are more likely move to major cities over time than people born in Australia.¹⁴ This highlights the need for a greater focus on retention and supporting newcomers in regional areas to develop lasting connections that benefit them and the regional communities where they settle.

Settlement and integration require mutual adaptation and shared responsibility by everyone, including newcomers, receiving communities and government at all levels. Within regional communities, as in all communities, the economic, social, and civic dimensions of integration need to be addressed holistically.

For many newcomers, the decision to relocate to, or remain in, a regional community ultimately depends on whether they feel a sufficient sense of welcome and belonging. International and Australian experience indicates that local community attitudes and involvement, and strong social networks within and between communities, help newcomers build roots in regional areas.¹⁵ A community that is well informed, welcoming, and actively involved in the settlement process provides a strong foundation for newcomers to build new lives and thrive.¹⁶

Breaking down language and cultural barriers requires intentional strategies and coordination to ensure that people have the chance to get involved in community activities and make new connections.¹⁷ Place-based community engagement initiatives provide a platform to recognise the shared aspirations of the local regional community and newcomers, while also creating a welcoming and socially inclusive environment. For example, SSI has found growing acceptance of refugee settlement in our joint research with the University of New England monitoring community attitudes to

refugee resettlement in Armidale, which is likely due to SSI's strong investment in community engagement when refugees were first settled there.

However, a challenge in regional settlement of refugees is that current funding models for settlement services are prescriptive and focus on addressing the immediate and ongoing needs of refugees. There is little scope for engaging and managing relationships with the local community, coordinating volunteers or developing dialogue between stakeholders. Consequently, SSI has delivered self-funded community engagement initiatives, such as those in Armidale, to foster the inclusion of newcomers in all aspects of social, economic and community life.

Recommendation 6: The Australian Government should expand humanitarian settlement to other regional locations, leveraging the lessons from the successful model led by SSI in Australia's newest regional settlement location, Armidale, NSW. Funding models for settlement services in regional areas should provide dedicated resources for community engagement initiatives that facilitate two-way exchange and recognise the vital role of social connections in fostering welcome and belonging among refugees.

Recommendation 7: The Australian Government should ensure that planning of new settlement locations is based on a thorough understanding of existing community attitudes, capacities, and service infrastructure to underpin decisions about settlement locations and include consultation with local First Nations communities.

Recommendation 8: Planning for regional settlement locations should include enhanced consultation and collaboration with state/territory and local government, settlement providers and the community sector.

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¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2022). [Projected Global Resettlement Needs](#). 2023.

² <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/south-sudan/>

³ The White House (2022), [Memorandum on Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2023](#).

⁴ Government of Canada (2021), [2021 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration](#).

⁵ Centre for Policy Development. (2019). [Enabling refugee entrepreneurs to flourish](https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019-04/apo-nid229866.pdf). <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019-04/apo-nid229866.pdf>

⁶ Wood, T. (2020). [The role of 'complementary pathways' in refugee protection](#). Kaldor Centre for Refugee Law. University of New South Wales.

⁷ Refugee Council of Australia. (2023). [Complementary pathways for refugees: policy principles](#).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ SSI/ARTD Consultants. (2021). [Summary of the evaluation of the HSP in Armidale](https://www.ssi.org.au/images/files/SSI_insights/Summary_of_evaluation_HSP_Armidale_20220311_1.pdf). https://www.ssi.org.au/images/files/SSI_insights/Summary_of_evaluation_HSP_Armidale_20220311_1.pdf

¹¹ Culos, I., McMahon, T., Khorana, S., Robertson, S., Baganz, E., Magee, L., Agha, Y. (2022). *Foundations for Belonging 2022 Insights on Newly Arrived Refugees: Family separation and reunion*

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¹² Watt, S., McMahon, T. & Paolini, S. (2023). [*From the 'resistant' to the 'champions': Community attitudes during the first four years of refugee settlement in Armidale, NSW*](#). University of New England/SSI.

¹³ Van Kooy, J. v., Wickes, R., & Ali, A. (2019). [*Welcoming regions*](#). Monash University; The Treasury and Department of Home Affairs. (2018).

¹⁴ Mackey, W., Coates, B. & Sherrell, H. (2022). [*Migrants in the Australian workforce*](#). Grattan Institute.

¹⁵ Musoni, E. (2019). [*Understanding regional settlement in Australia: Key learnings from past experiences*](#). Canberra. RAI.; Stump, T. (2018).

¹⁶ SSI. (2019). [*All in for Armidale: A whole-of-community approach to Ezidi settlement*](#).

¹⁷ Stump, T. (2018). [*The Right Fit: Attracting and retaining newcomers in regional towns*](#). MNSW.