INTRODUCTION

The Australian Government invites the views of the Australian community on the viability of a pilot private/community sponsorship program for refugees. Your input will assist in determining the feasibility, scope and characteristics of a pilot program. This discussion paper provides background on the proposal and raises a number of key issues.

The paper:

- explains how Australia’s Humanitarian Program currently operates;
- identifies a number of important factors in considering the viability and potential design of a pilot private/community sponsorship program; and
- outlines the history of settlement services for humanitarian entrants.

Details of how to lodge a submission are included at the end of this paper. Comments are sought by Friday 27 July 2012.

The Government will make a decision on whether a pilot program should proceed after taking into account the community’s views. By its very nature, any pilot program would be of a modest size.
AUSTRALIA’S HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM

Refugees in the world today

The forcible displacement of people due to conflict and persecution is one of the major challenges facing the world today. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that, at the end of 2011, there were in total approximately 10.55 million refugees of concern to UNHCR. Within this number, 781,299 refugees were assessed to be in need of resettlement.

UNHCR has indicated that priority resettlement needs for 2012 alone stand at 172,196 but that only around 80,000 annual resettlement places are available globally.

Australia’s role

As a member of the global community, Australia shares responsibility for protecting refugees worldwide and resolving refugee situations through the system of international refugee protection.

This commitment is most strongly expressed through Australia’s Humanitarian Program, which aims to respond to global humanitarian and resettlement needs, to enhance Australia’s international position and, most significantly, to be one in which the Australian community has confidence.

Since the end of World War II, Australia has welcomed about 775,000 people from different countries under its Humanitarian Program, adapting to changing global resettlement and humanitarian needs.

Australia’s Humanitarian Program

Australia’s Humanitarian Program (the Program) has a number of components:

- A refugee component for the resettlement in Australia of people who are subject to persecution in their home country and who have a strong need for resettlement. Most of these refugees are referred to Australia by UNHCR.

- The Special Humanitarian Program (SHP), under which people in Australia can propose family members and others overseas who are subject to persecution or substantial discrimination amounting to gross violation of human rights in their home country.

- An onshore component for people who have entered Australia and who engage Australia’s protection obligations under the Refugee Convention. This includes people who arrive by boat as well as those who arrive by air.

Each year, the Australian Government determines the number of visas that can be granted under the program. In 2012–13, this is set at 13,750 places.

Since 1996–97, the offshore component of the Humanitarian Program has been linked numerically to the onshore protection component of the program. Successive governments have maintained this link, as it enables planning and budgeting for government-funded settlement services to properly meet the needs of humanitarian entrants.
The Humanitarian Program is currently under great pressure from large numbers of applications from refugees wishing to resettle in Australia, from people seeking to reunite with family members under the SHP and, in particular, from an increased number of people seeking protection after arrival in Australia by boat.

Figure 1: Program outcomes by component of the Humanitarian Program from 2001–02 to 2011–12

* 2011–12 visa grants are calculated at 30 April 2012

More information about Australia’s Humanitarian Program can be found on the department’s website at www.immi.gov.au.
REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP PILOT CONCEPT

What is the Australian Government proposing?

The Government is considering ways to increase the number of places available under the Humanitarian Program by looking at the feasibility of a pilot private/community sponsorship program for refugees.

Establishing a private sponsorship component under the Humanitarian Program has the potential to:

- harness community goodwill and empower community groups to augment Australia’s existing humanitarian intake;
- provide a highly supportive settlement environment for new humanitarian entrants; and
- offer an integrated approach for some entrants to move from resettlement, though work experience, to employment.

Crucially, a private/community sponsorship program may provide an opportunity to increase the size of the Humanitarian Program without significantly impacting on the Budget.

Building on the goodwill that exists in communities, it would provide local opportunities to be directly involved in the resettlement of refugees from vulnerable circumstances overseas.

A private/community sponsorship program could also reduce the time taken by refugees to obtain employment, thereby reducing reliance on government income support benefits.

Through regular discussions with refugee communities and organisations, the Government is aware that there is considerable interest in the private/community sponsorship concept. Specifically, several community groups have offered to make in-kind and financial contributions to support more humanitarian entrants to come to Australia.

Through this paper, the Government is seeking views on:

- who should be able to sponsor refugees;
- which refugees should be eligible for sponsorship;
- the responsibilities of sponsors; and
- a safety net for sponsored refugees.

Refugees sponsored under a pilot private/community sponsorship program would be required, as with other applicants for humanitarian visas, to meet health, character and security requirements.
Do any other countries operate a private/community refugee sponsorship program?

The Canadian Government has operated a Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program since 1978, with more than 200,000 people migrating to Canada under the program.

The Canadian Government has set an admissions target of around 5,500 people under the PSR program in 2012. This equates to more than 40 per cent of Canada’s total 2012 refugee resettlement quota of 13,000 people.

In Canada, refugees are sponsored by three main groups:

- Sponsorship Agreement Holders, which are incorporated organisations that have signed formal agreements with the Canadian Government;
- Community Sponsors, which are organisations that may sponsor up to two cases per year; and
- “Groups of five” individuals.

Under the PSR, refugees are responsible for medical and travel costs for themselves and their dependent family members, although there are loan options available to refugees if they are unable to cover these costs.

Sponsors are expected to provide a level of support equal to that of the prevailing rates for social assistance in the anticipated community of settlement, while refugees are expected to contribute to their own settlement costs from funds they bring to Canada or earn during their sponsorship period. These includes start-up costs, such as one-time payment for household items, furniture, linen, food staples, clothing, deposits for utilities, phone installation and first month’s rent.

Entrants under the PSR program are able to access free English or French language training.

While the Canadian model provides a useful context and international precedent, the Government is not expressing a view on whether elements of it should be replicated in Australia.

How can the Australian community be involved in this discussion?

Your input will assist in determining the feasibility, scope and characteristics of a pilot program.

The Government has already started actively seeking the views of peak refugee bodies, non-government organisations (NGOs) and other community stakeholders on the viability of a sponsorship model and pilot.

This paper seeks the views of the Australian community, including individuals, community groups and church groups, as well as local and state governments.
Questions for consideration:
1. Would a pilot of a private/community sponsorship program for refugees be feasible?
2. Are there any alternative or additional measures that the Government could consider in order to increase Australia’s Humanitarian Program without a significant budgetary impact?

Who should be able to sponsor refugees under Australia's Humanitarian Program?

Those granted visas under the refugee component of the program are generally not sponsored or proposed by a person or organisation in Australia. Rather, most applications are received following after a referral for resettlement by UNHCR.

Applications for SHP visas must be supported by a proposer in Australia. If the application is successful, SHP proposers help the applicant to organise and pay for their travel to Australia and assist with their accommodation and initial orientation in Australia. An SHP proposer must be an Australian citizen, permanent resident or eligible New Zealand citizen over the age of 18, or an organisation in Australia.

Questions for consideration:
3. Who should be able to sponsor refugees under a pilot?
4. What type of vetting or checking should be required for sponsors wishing to sponsor a refugee under a pilot?

Identifying refugees for sponsorship

Under the Humanitarian Program, the UNHCR plays an important role in determining which refugees should be referred to Australia for resettlement.

Applicants under the SHP are commonly close family members of a proposer, who agrees to assist the applicant with their travel, accommodation and orientation once they have been granted a visa.

Following referral by UNHCR or a nomination by a proposer, the department makes a decision on the application under the Humanitarian Program, after consideration against the legislative criteria for a humanitarian visa.

Questions for consideration:
5. How should potential applicants be identified for sponsorship and prioritised for visa processing under the pilot?
6. What involvement should community organisations, UNHCR and the Australian Government have in identifying refugees for sponsorship?
Responsibilities of sponsors

Sponsors may play a critical role in the identification and settlement of refugees selected under any pilot.

Currently, proposers of humanitarian entrants under the SHP help the entrant to organise and pay for travel to Australia, and assist with initial accommodation and orientation in Australia. If they are eligible, SHP visa holders can access services under the Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) program, as well as Centrelink and other mainstream services (A list of information sources, including on current settlement services, is included at the end of this paper). Eligibility for Centrelink, Medicare and other mainstream services is determined by legislation administered by relevant Australian Government agencies.

A pilot would require sponsors to take responsibility for assisting refugees with most, if not all, of their resettlement, which may allow for an increase in the size of the overall Humanitarian Program without a significant impact on the Budget.

Questions for consideration:

7. What responsibilities should sponsors have and what undertakings should they be required to give?
8. Should the level of support by sponsors, and length of time it should continue, be defined?
9. Should a sponsored refugee be eligible for HSS services?
10. What government services should the refugee be able to access once they are in Australia?
11. How should sponsors be monitored by Government or a third party to ensure their responsibilities to the sponsored refugee are being met?
12. What is the most appropriate way for the Government to ensure that sponsors comply with their sponsorship obligations?
13. What role could the payment of a bond play in ensuring that sponsors adequately provide for sponsored refugees?
14. Should sponsored refugees exit the scheme after a certain period?

A safety net

The Government is committed to ensuring the effective and smooth settlement of refugees in the Australian community. It is important that refugees sponsored through any pilot scheme are able to settle well in Australia and become fully participating members of the Australian community. A history of the development of settlement services provided for humanitarian entrants is included at the end of this paper.

In any pilot of a private/community sponsorship program, and in any larger program if one is implemented, the Government may consider measures to assist sponsored refugees in the event that their sponsor be unable to fulfil their obligations after the refugee’s arrival in Australia.
Questions for consideration:
15. What, if any, ‘safety net’ features should be included in a private/community sponsorship model?
16. What measures could the Government implement to help sponsors meet their sponsorship commitments?
17. Should there be any sanctions if sponsors fail to meet their responsibilities?
18. Should a sponsored refugee be able to change sponsors, if their initial sponsor fails to meet their responsibilities?

SUBMISSIONS

If you would like to provide a written submission on the viability of a pilot private/community sponsorship program, please send it to:

   Pilot of private/community sponsorship submission
   Assistant Secretary
   Humanitarian Branch
   Department of Immigration and Citizenship
   PO Box 25
   BELCONNEN ACT 2616

Submissions may also be sent by email to humanitarian.submission@immi.gov.au.

All submissions should be received by Friday 27 July 2012. Submissions received after the deadline may not be considered.

Further information is available on the department’s website at www.immi.gov.au.

What happens next?

The Government will make a decision on the viability of a pilot program and its potential size once the community’s views are known and have been considered.
ATTACHMENT

Settlement services for humanitarian entrants – a history

The origins of the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS), and now the HSS program, lie in the Community Refugee Settlement Scheme (CRSS), the On Arrival Accommodation (OAA) program and related programs that were their predecessors.

Until the 1970s, Australian settlement services made no distinction between the needs of humanitarian entrants and other migrants. Like other migrants arriving by assisted passage, humanitarian entrants were eligible for accommodation at migrant hostels. However, research into the settlement experiences of South-East Asian humanitarian entrants arriving in the 1970s suggested the need for more specialised assistance for entrants who did not wish to live in migrant hostels. At the same time, the community sector was seeking a greater role in meeting the settlement needs of humanitarian entrants.

- 1979: The CRSS was established in 1979 to support humanitarian entrants who did not wish to stay in hostels and preferred to move directly into the general community. The cornerstone of the CRSS was a network of volunteer groups which provided assistance with finding accommodation and employment, general orientation and social support. The Committee for the Allocation of Loan Funds to Refugees in Centres (CALFRIC) provided support for humanitarian entrants who wished to move from hostels into private housing by offering interest-free loans to cover associated costs.

- 1981: An evaluation of the CRSS in 1981 found that both entrants and their volunteer groups were very positive about the scheme.

- 1982: The department introduced a system of grants to assist volunteer groups to cover their expenses. In general, the CRSS was targeted at entrants considered to have relatively high needs, such as single parents or large families. The benefits of the scheme extended beyond immediate assistance to these entrants.

- 1984: A review of migrant hostels led to the closure of several hostels and a general shift towards self-contained accommodation.

- 1986: A Review of Migrant and Multicultural Programs, chaired by Dr James Jupp, recommended that accommodation be provided only for those with limited financial resources, and especially for humanitarian entrants. It also recommended a shift to self-contained, self-catering units with co-located support services. The department established the OAA program in order to provide this kind of accommodation for humanitarian entrants. The former migrant hostels were closed and replaced with government-leased flats.

- 1987: A report on the effectiveness of the CRSS found that there were only minor statistical differences between the experiences of entrants supported by the CRSS, and the experiences of those who were not, in relation to access to housing, employment, English tuition and general integration into the community. However, it noted that CRSS entrants almost unanimously praised the scheme and considered themselves to have received substantial benefits from it.

- 1989: Entrants who had survived torture and trauma were able to access specialised support, including counselling, through a nation-wide network of agencies.
- Early 1990s: Entrants were also eligible for assistance from the Clothing Reimbursement Scheme for emergency clothing on arrival.

- 1994: A review of the CRSS drew attention to the variable levels of support available within service types. The level of support to CRSS entrants varied largely according to the capacity and skills of volunteer groups rather than according to the needs of the entrants.

- Mid-1990s: As CALFRIC was phased out, the department developed a Rent Rebate Scheme, under which entrants whose rent and utility contributions had been paid in full were eligible for a rebate for four weeks’ rental contribution.

- 1995: The department entered into a national contract for the provision of property management and ancillary services for OAA. Under these arrangements, the type and level of assistance available to entrants was decided by their allocation to either the OAA or CRSS.

- 1997: The department developed the IHSS as a national framework for improving humanitarian settlement services. The strategy aimed to make more effective use of settlement services for humanitarian entrants through partnerships with community organisations and improving links between settlement planning activities and service delivery.

- 1997–98: As a starting point, the 1997–98 Budget included an increase in the level of material assistance provided through CRSS groups and rolled the pre-existing Clothing Reimbursement Scheme into a general grant for establishing a household.

- 1998: A report on departmentally-funded services by the Auditor-General highlighted the inequities in on-arrival arrangements. Separate data suggested a considerable mismatch between entrant needs and their referral to services, with overseas posts tending to stream entrants into services according to service availability rather than on the basis of a needs assessment.

- 2000: The IHSS evolved into a suite of specialised services for humanitarian entrants. The IHSS marked the first implementation of a purchaser/provider model of service delivery in humanitarian settlement services.

- 2003: An evaluation of the IHSS by Urbis Keys Young identified a number of positive outcomes from IHSS services including an increased equity in services. The evaluation identified a number of areas for attention, including a lack of common understanding about what constituted initial settlement.

- 2008: The Complex Case Support Program was introduced to provide specialised and intensive case management services to humanitarian entrants with exceptional needs.

- April 2011: The Government implemented the HSS program. It endeavours to strengthen the ability of humanitarian clients to participate in the economic and social life of Australia, and to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge to independently access services beyond the initial settlement period. The HSS program delivers key services, including case management, accommodation, onshore orientation, local area coordination, and an optional volunteer program.

- September 2011: A review of the HSS by Mr David Richmond AO found that the HSS is well managed and effectively delivered. The review also identified 70 recommended improvements to the overall management and administration of HSS.
Further information on the Humanitarian Program


