



REVIEW INTO INTEGRATION, EMPLOYMENT AND SETTLEMENT OUTCOMES FOR REFUGEES AND HUMANITARIAN ENTRANTS

Rural Australians for Refugees (RAR) is a national, voluntary network of community-based groups working to support and advocate for asylum seekers and refugees. The network has been operating since 2002. It covers 5 states and comprises 65 groups and affiliates in rural and regional towns.

RAR initially started as a campaign reaction to detention and refoulement policies and to the increasing demonisation of people seeking asylum and a catch cry “country people don’t behave that way.” Over the years the number of groups has increased, and the focus widened to include both practical and active support for asylum seekers in detention and in the community. Its platform has also broadened to take on a positive advocacy platform in support of a larger humanitarian settlement program.

Groups currently are variously involved in:

- Fundraising, material and direct support to refugees and people seeking asylum in the through metropolitan support agencies
- Hosting asylum seekers for visits from metro centres and supporting SHEV holders with integration assistance in negotiating for jobs, day-to-day practicalities and appointments
- Working in the gaps in the service system for both newly arrived refugees and secondary migrants who are no longer entitled to assistance
- Events and raising awareness about asylum and refugees in local communities
- Providing scholarships and other education support and business mentoring
- Visits to people in detention, letter writing and advocacy

RAR National supports the national network with information sharing, campaigns and works with other sector agencies on strategic priorities. At present these include:

- Ending offshore detention
- Restoring support for people awaiting finalisation of applications (SRSS)
- Increasing the humanitarian intake, informing policy on refugee settlement in rural and regional towns and reforming the Community Sponsorship Program (CSP)
- Advocating for improved portfolio administration including: review of contract arrangements to include accountability for community and client outcomes, improving processing times

RAR Starting Point

RAR's contribution to this review is based on the following premises:

- the Humanitarian Program has been a consistent and creditable beacon in Australia's migration story for decades. It has been able to provide balance to the swings of population debates and economic arguments and has contributed enormously to the growth of Australia as a nation. RAR believes that this Review provides an opportunity to both build on what has been working and to adjust and introduce new elements to respond to emerging challenges
- RAR's focus in the Review applies to how the Program operates in rural and regional Australia and principally to the proposition that more refugees and secondary migrants will be settled in the country. RAR's view is that this represents both enormous and positive opportunities but also some challenges which are outlined below
- the culture and circumstances of rural and regional Australia present different public policy and communication challenges to those found in capital cities. Key among them are higher levels of **connectedness**, higher **intergroup engagement** and a culture of voluntary contribution with a tradition of communal problem solving and support
- the Humanitarian Program is just that. Filling jobs or taking population pressure off cities, or dealing with populist debates, whilst very important to the success of refugee settlement, should not be the primary drivers but rather the cornerstones of building settlement success
- successful refugee settlement involves economic, cultural and social factors which - in rural and regional Australia - demands the engagement of both regional and rural communities, the settlers themselves and their cultural communities. A failure to engage carries with it the risk of failed settlement/flight to the city and/or the breakdown in social cohesion in the community, with the associated social and economic costs
- attracting people to country towns is more than a matter of filling job vacancies, and retaining people there is more than a matter of visa condition. People will stay if they feel they have a future and acceptance for themselves and their kids. That will mean they need to be able to progress materially, socially and culturally as well as in their work
- settlement in rural and/or regional areas should be planned, based on **good and comprehensive data**, involve **local structures** before and during settlement and be **informed by both community and refugee needs**
- settling more refugees in country areas will mean that both the humanitarian and wider **service systems will need to adapt** and:
 - the rural and regional circumstance is fundamentally different to the metropolitan one both materially and culturally
 - the service and support needs differ - new refugees require different levels of case management and direct support whereas secondary migrants a more diffuse range of integration support
 - employers need to be engaged in a way that they contribute by way of mentoring, on the job skill training, opportunities to upgrade skills/qualifications externally and so on
 - employment services need to be sharper and able to provide more tailored and local solutions

- current HSP contract provisions could be widened beyond direct case services to apply the kind of local, asset- based community development approach that is needed in for country areas
- current service arrangements need to better consider the combined effects of distance, transport systems and hours of service especially in circumstances where refugees have already obtained a job, or where spouses may be at home with young children
- accountabilities for the service providers, and for the whole Humanitarian Program, need to be outcomes focussed
- there is a disjunct between the service system and the volunteer culture that exists in country towns, the social and economic interconnectedness and the communication culture of being able to “tap people on the shoulder” to get things done
- there is an opportunity to both engage cultural activities and to build businesses that employ refugees in the area of food production. All country towns have the need to divert organic waste and food production requires organics. There is the opportunity to roll-out projects that have involved refugees in peri-urban areas into country towns
- a sub category of the Humanitarian Program - the Community Sponsorship Program (CSP) - **misses out** in its failure to engage the **goodwill and contribution of community players**. Country Australia has a long-held tradition of good neighbourliness. Country people have participated in sponsorship programs in the past and RAR, Sanctuary and Amnesty and other groups are currently providing generous (and unacknowledged) material and integration support for asylum seekers. There is considerable potential to ignite a groundswell of more general community support through a revised CSP
- in regional and rural communities there is a perception that that the relatively smaller Humanitarian Program suffers both from **lack of priority, an overly “metrocentric” frame** and **lack of coordination** in the face of the bigger spenders such as employment, education, health and so on. Adding regional and rural refugee settlement will add further complexity unless there is a deliberate effort to apply better data (including regional development data) funding models and coordination mechanisms
 In addition, there is a pronounced disjunct between settlement policy and other areas of migrant and refugee entry that can lead to **adverse impact on settlement and integration** outcomes. Most notable here are the areas of spouse entry and family reunion, citizenship, special humanitarian and community sponsorship
- planning for settlement is better supported with information and the availability of decent current data. There has been a culture of secrecy and reluctance to disclose otherwise innocuous information about numbers, location and even successes in settlement. The refugee sector recently had to an submit FOI request for the guidelines for the Community Sponsorship Program and even then, key elements were redacted. Rebuilding acceptance of refugee settlement will require a more open approach to basic and routine information- especially where that it is required by community groups providing integration support to new settlers
- All the above aside, our history has shown us that refugees survive and flourish when they find safety and certainty and the prospect of a decent future for themselves and their children. We don’t need to overegg the settlement pudding but rather make sure that it is primarily based on the needs of the settlers and the host communities

Recommendations

1. Place-based program for rural and regional Australia

“The myth that (country people) are a bunch of rednecks ...has been busted. They are more socially connected with higher rates of volunteering and more progressive in their outlook than many metro areas.” (Weekly Times 2 January)

“Regional people have a shared passion for the places they live, not ideological obsession” (Darren Chester MP Twitter 2 January)

A choice to settle more refugees and secondary migrant into rural and regional Australia should respect the fundamental identification with place and local connections that exists in the country and avoid metro-centric and top-down program approaches.

RAR believes that with a the relatively new focus on rural and regional settlement there is an opportunity to introduce new models of program delivery.

RAR recommends:

- [the introduction a period of testing locally driven placed-based and needs-based approaches as a model for rural and regional settlement](#)
- [testing could involve selection of rural/regional locations with different characteristic to “prove” models for wider application.](#)
- [the testing phase would also allow for the establishment of a more rigorous evaluation framework that explores both individual and community settlement outcomes.](#)

2. Adjustments to the service system

“The needs of our clients aren’t to be found in a 9-4 office hours, not are they met by ticking off contract outputs” (RAR member Albury)

A “place” focus will enable greater accountability from the service system, but it will also require adaptation.

RAR recommends:

- [adjustment to contract deliverables by HSP providers to include a greater emphasis on community engagement and development as well as case-management](#)
- [funded structures to support overall coordination and better buy-in from other local services such as schools, health system, transport and to encourage skin in the game from employers, local government and other local/regional institutions](#)
- [a more tailor-made, localised approach to employment services for refugees which includes emerging job placement initiatives such as Talent Beyond Boundaries and Refugee Talent](#)

3. Engage communities and build capacity

“We need to deal with the legacy of twenty years of public demonization of refugees and asylum seekers and to build more acceptance in the wider community...”

“Retention of new settlers is a matter for all of us. People leave towns for lots of good reasons. We just need to make sure that it isn’t for the wrong reasons.” (Coalition MP)

Good community engagement and communication up front is an essential to maintain community cohesion and to build acceptance of new settlers. The Hamilton example shows us how an active program of preparation and communication to introduce the community to settlers (and vice versa) and supported by a local leadership group.

A critical element in this process is the need to engage cultural groups – in other regional centres, and cities areas about the needs of proposed groups of settlers.

Such engagement of purposeful engagement and direct involvement of community groups also provides the opportunity to reset the narrative about refugees and migrants and to build a culture of understanding and acceptance.

RAR recommends:

- a) **Modification of the existing Community Sponsorship Program to:**
- **harness the community volunteer resources to provide integration support**
 - **build capacity of community groups**
 - **reward effort and humanitarian ethos by making sponsored places additional to the existing Humanitarian Program**
 - **remove the requirement for a job offer, retain a proportion of CSP places for direct employer nomination and/or matching and improve processing times**
 - **remove visa fees and reduce costs to community**
 - **include community engagement and capacity building as outcomes in service contracts**
 - **include a risk framework and outcome evaluation as part of the accountability provisions**
 - **retain a proportion of CSP places for direct employer nomination**
 - **preserve the integrity of the Family Reunion program and the SHP by improving processing times to avoid CSP being used as a channel. Allow family nomination in a reduced category in conjunction with UNHCR**
- b) **Build capacity within the volunteer sector within communities to better engage with the Humanitarian Program**

4. Tailor settlement placements in consultation

Small country towns mean small numbers. More is not necessarily better.

“We are proud of what we have achieved but we don’t want any more just yet” (Councillor in WA town)

RAR recommends: decisions about the placement of refugees in rural and regional centres must be made with full consultation and based on decent data.

5. Integrate more closely with regional and local priorities

RAR recommends:

- a) **Align program delivery within regional development and/or local government structures and priorities.**

- b) Encourage leadership in supporting refugee enterprise development to build independent local employment opportunities for refugees e.g. waste diversion and local food production

6. Improve Commonwealth planning and portfolio coordination

RAR recommends:

That the Commonwealth:

- introduces a coordination mechanism for rural and regional Australia that aligns research, needs and funding for settlement (preferably on place-based principles)
- adopts a “hub and spoke” approach of larger regional centres servicing smaller outlying communities for key services
- selects and tests representative rural and regional locations to identify the core principles and elements that are needed to increase settlement (of refugees and secondary migrants)
- adopts both a formative and summative evaluation process to establish outcome values.

7. Portfolio administration

Integration is supported where family units are united, where people can move freely and communicate their needs to associated areas of the system. Improvements to the processing of other immigration categories that impact on refugee lives such as Family Reunion and Citizenship will help refugees to become and feel a part of Australia.

RAR recommends:

That the Department of Home Affairs:

- establishes transparent and evidence standards of service for key operations including Family Reunion, Citizenship and regularly publishes data on processing outcomes
- Reviews the accessibility of interpreting/translating services – especially in locations where there is little familiarity amongst employers and service providers such as health professionals.

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