

# Service responses for people with disabilities from refugee backgrounds in northern Melbourne



victorian refugee  
health network

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## Executive summary

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As part of the *Absolutely everyone: State disability plan 2017–2020* the Victorian Government funded the Victorian Refugee Health Network (the Network) ‘to complete a needs assessment of the responsiveness of the disability and refugee health service system in northern Melbourne’. This report details the outcomes of the needs assessment and makes recommendations for service and policy changes and future activities to improve service responsiveness.

The issues facing people with disabilities from refugee backgrounds are multi-faceted. The service pathways for people living with a disability can be complex when accessing supports needed; discussing concerns with a general practitioner, maternal and child health nurse or teacher; seeking and negotiating services for diagnosis and other assessments; and accessing ongoing support services as required. Services in Victoria are typically organised across the life stages – early intervention, school years, adulthood and older adulthood – for most conditions, and/or a service pathway that starts with hospitalisation following an accident or major illness.

For people born with a disability-related condition there is a focus in the early years – and sometimes in primary school – on identification of concerns, assessment and then access to required services. For those who acquire a disability through a major accident or illness, the pathway to disability supports typically starts with hospital-based care, with discharge predicated on access to aids and equipment and rehabilitation services as needed.

For the broader Victorian community, there are significant barriers to service access, including long wait times for some services, and sometimes multiple appointments for diagnostic and other assessments to access the necessary ongoing supports.

These challenges are compounded for new arrivals from refugee backgrounds who may:

- arrive with a condition that is undiagnosed or not formally diagnosed, or which may or may not be familiar to Australian practitioners
- arrive with a poorly managed condition, which may or may not be familiar to Australian practitioners
- be an adult presenting with a condition that is typically diagnosed in childhood
- arrive without necessary aids and equipment (for example, a wheelchair or walking aids).

These challenges are in addition to the broader settlement challenges facing new arrivals from refugee backgrounds. These include negotiating access to housing, transport, income

support, education and employment in a new country; typically trying to learn a new language; and communicating via interpreting services. Settlement is further complicated by the impact of torture and other traumatic events (such as exposure to war and conflict) and the complexities of negotiating access to services cross-culturally.

This report has been written at a time when there have been significant changes in service arrangements with the progressive roll-out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the suite of aged care reforms that has accompanied the introduction of My Aged Care (such as changes to home support, including Home Care Packages and the Commonwealth Home Support Programme).

At a population level, there has been an increase of new arrivals from refugee backgrounds in the outer northern metropolitan region of Victoria, in particular the Hume local government area. The welcome introduction in 2012 of a waiver of visa health requirements (the health waiver) for humanitarian visa holders has also led to an increase in numbers of humanitarian entrants who are living with a disability.

The focus of this report is on:

- service provision to people from refugee backgrounds arriving on humanitarian visas, who have a disability or impairment before they reach Australia
- access to services for people who have a disability or impairment and who are seeking asylum while living in the community.

## Recommendations

We recommend:

Recommendation 1: The Commonwealth Government departments of Home Affairs and Social Services provide access to free interpreting services for allied health MBS funded consultations through TIS.

Recommendation 2: The Commonwealth Government Department of Home Affairs, through its Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) contracts, provides NDIS equivalent packages of support for people seeking asylum who meet the non-residency related requirements for NDIS.

Recommendation 3: The Commonwealth and Victorian governments fund NDIS equivalent packages of support for people holding temporary protection visas who meet the non-residency related requirements for NDIS.

Recommendation 4: The NDIA develops a comprehensive language service policy to guide its service provision and that of funded service providers to improve clarity about use of language services. This policy should emphasise choice for people with low English proficiency and promote effective communication between service providers and participants.

Recommendation 5: The Victorian Government Department of Education and Training review the EAL learning support needs of special schools, including approaches to EAL assessment and learning plans.

Recommendation 6: The Foundation House School Support Program and the Refugee Education Support Program continue to provide professional development and broader school support for special schools.

Recommendation 7: The Victorian Refugee Health Network, through the Victorian Network of Asylum Seeker Agencies, conducts a survey to understand better the number of people seeking asylum who have disabilities.

- Recommendation 8: The NDIA includes identifiers in its dataset to assist in ascertaining participation rates of people from refugee backgrounds in the NDIS.
- Recommendation 9: Local refugee health networks develop care pathways across health, disability and settlement services for people with significant impairments from refugee backgrounds. This should be through a consensus process including all relevant services and, where appropriate, people with disabilities and their carers.
- Recommendation 10: Foundation House, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health in their work with advisory groups of people with disabilities from refugee backgrounds and their carers explore what is required to support them with self-advocacy.
- Recommendation 11: The NDIA and the Commonwealth Government Department of Health review consumer-driven care models implemented by NDIS and aged care reforms to take into account the particular needs of people from refugee backgrounds, including longer appointment times, interpreters, flexible service delivery systems, and planners who are skilled in working cross culturally and have an understanding of the refugee experience.
- Recommendation 12: The Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services explores methods to deliver accessible community transport options for new humanitarian arrivals with significant impairments.
- Recommendation 13: All services have policies and procedures in place to assess whether an interpreter is required and to engage interpreting services.
- Recommendation 14: All services provide training to staff about assessing the need for an interpreter, accessing an interpreter and facilitating an interpreter mediated conversation.
- Recommendation 15: The Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services, Humanitarian Settlement Providers, Refugee Health Programs and Primary Health Networks provide community based accessible information to new arrival communities regarding My Health Record to support implementation including information to address privacy concerns.
- Recommendation 16: The Refugee Health Program explore using a shared health record, possibly My Health Record, adhering to appropriate privacy laws and in consultation with people from refugee backgrounds, to support continuity of care. This should include exploring using records that could be shared with other primary health care providers, settlement and disability services.
- Recommendation 17: The Victorian Government Department of Health and Human Services review the findings of their Refugee Immunisation Project to consider broader application of the appointment tracking and reminder system for the provision of on arrival health services for people from refugee backgrounds.
- Recommendation 18: The Commonwealth Government departments of Social Services and of Home Affairs, the Victorian Government Department of Health and Human Services and contracted services work to implement a system that supports health information transfer from offshore to health services that will be conducting the on-arrival health assessments.
- Recommendation 19: The Commonwealth Government Department of Home Affairs and the Australian Digital Health Agency develop a mechanism to transfer appropriate summary medical information, gathered prior to arrival in Australia, to My Health Record.
- Recommendation 20: Primary Health Networks, Refugee Health Programs and specialist refugee services target capacity-building at general practices that are well utilised by communities from refugee backgrounds (including multilingual practices).

- Recommendation 21: Primary Health Networks develop and maintain resources to assist general practice with referral pathways for people from refugee backgrounds with disabilities.
- Recommendation 22: Primary Health Networks work closely with settlement, Refugee Health Programs and Refugee Health Fellows to identify practices that are undertaking good quality health assessments and follow-up care.
- Recommendation 23: All service providers engage with communities to find a common dialogue to address stigma associated with some disabilities.
- Recommendation 24: Foundation House and specialist paediatric refugee services provide professional learning for psychologists and other practitioners undertaking developmental and cognitive assessments for children and adolescents.
- Recommendation 25: The Victorian Government Department of Education and Training take into account additional considerations required in assessing students from refugee backgrounds in developing the new three-tiered funding model for Program for Students with Disabilities.
- Recommendation 26: The Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services extends funding for hiring of mobility aids until new humanitarian entrants have access to Victorian Aids and Equipment Programs or the NDIS.
- Recommendation 27: Services and policy makers consider the compounding effect of long waiting times on newly arrived people with disabilities from refugee backgrounds when reviewing frameworks for providing priority access.
- Recommendation 28: The Victorian Government Department of Education and Training take into account particular transition support needs of children with disabilities from refugee backgrounds.
- Recommendation 29: Carers organisations, including young carers organisations, provide culturally appropriate responses to carers from refugee backgrounds who may be isolated due to their caring responsibilities.
- Recommendation 30: The Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services provide early notification to Humanitarian Settlement Program providers of mobility restrictions experienced by Refugee and Humanitarian Programme entrants to assist with sourcing appropriate housing.
- Recommendation 31: Disability Employment Services build cultural competence and have strategic approaches to engaging with people with disabilities from refugee backgrounds.
- Recommendation 32: The Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services investigates different approaches to the provision of employment support services to people with disabilities from refugee backgrounds, which may include Customised Employment.
- Recommendation 33: The Victorian Refugee Health Network identifies a network or working group who may undertake stage 2 of this project - the facilitation of an inter-sectoral working group that will pursue actions to implement the recommendations of this report.

**Please note:** Recommendations that are directed at Foundation House and the Victorian Refugee Health Network (authors of this report) are possible within current program funding.

The full report may be accessed here: <http://refugeehealthnetwork.org.au/service-responses-for-people-with-disabilities-from-refugee-backgrounds-in-northern-melbourne/>