



Submission: Australia's Humanitarian Program 2026-27

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Prepared by the Victorian Refugee Health Network

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Overview

The Victorian Refugee Health Network welcomes the invitation for consultation on the management and composition of the Australian Humanitarian Program 2026-27, including options for strengthening settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants.

The Australian Government's Humanitarian Program is a vital contribution to global protection efforts, providing resettlement for people seeking safety due to conflict, persecution and/or human rights abuses. In the context of ongoing global instability, increasing humanitarian emergencies, and a reduction of resettlement places around the world, the management and composition of Australia's Humanitarian Program has become even more critical.

Health and wellbeing is identified as a key domain in Australia's National Settlement Framework; an important foundation to achieve positive settlement outcomes, and a critical enabler for Humanitarian Program entrants' active engagement in a new society. This policy submission, prepared by the Victorian Refugee Health Network, highlights the need for sustainable efforts to be made to ensure positive health and wellbeing outcomes for all Humanitarian Program entrants.

About the Victorian Refugee Health Network

The Victorian Refugee Health Network (The Network) was established in June 2007 with the aim to ensure that all Victorians of refugee backgrounds, including those seeking asylum, have timely access to appropriate services and other resources required to build and maintain health and wellbeing.

The Network does this by facilitating greater coordination and collaboration amongst health and community services to provide more accessible and appropriate health services for people of refugee backgrounds. The Network harnesses the expertise from the health sector and the community to identify and respond to systemic issues and provide credible, trusted advice towards policy and service development.

This policy submission is informed by the Network's ongoing engagement with key stakeholders who consistently report on the experiences of Australia's Humanitarian Program entrants in Victoria. More information about the Network may be found on our website: www.refugeehealthnetwork.org.au



Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1. Uphold Australia's commitment of sharing responsibility to global protection efforts by avoiding any reductions in the Humanitarian Program's resettlement places

Recommendation 2. De-link onshore asylum processes and offshore humanitarian streams within Australia's Humanitarian Program

Recommendation 3. Ensure comprehensive pre-arrival assessments (PAAs) of Humanitarian Program entrants provide accurate, up-to-date information to facilitate effective and efficient onshore health and settlement responses

Recommendation 4. Recognise that Humanitarian Program entrants, particularly those with significant health and disability needs, require timely access to suitably tailored and resourced health and settlement responses

Recommendation 5. Establish facilitated pathways for Humanitarian Program entrants to access institutions (e.g. National Disability Insurance Scheme, MyAgedCare) within Australian society



Australia's 2026-27 Humanitarian Program

Recommendation 1. Uphold Australia's commitment of sharing responsibility to global protection efforts by avoiding any reductions in the Humanitarian Program's resettlement places

Australia has played a crucial role in global efforts for refugee resettlement over the years, with one million people settled in Australia through the refugee and humanitarian program since the end of World War II. The Australian Government's Humanitarian Program is a vital contribution to the nation's commitments of sharing responsibility for people seeking safety due to conflict, persecution and human rights abuses. In the context of ongoing global instability, evolving humanitarian emergencies, and a reduction of resettlement places around the world, Australia's Humanitarian Program has become even more crucial.

Victoria consistently welcomes approximately 30% of Australia's Humanitarian Program entrants to the state, with individuals, communities, local councils and governments coming together to create a sense of belonging for new arrivals and long-established communities. The Victorian Refugee Health Network recognises the significant positive impact of this program on the broader local, national and international community, and recommends avoiding any reductions in the number of resettlement places offered by the Humanitarian Program.

Recommendation 2. De-link onshore asylum processes and offshore humanitarian streams within Australia's Humanitarian Program

As noted in the Discussion Paper, Australia's Humanitarian Program currently consists of two components:

- *the offshore component, focusing on providing permanent resettlement in Australia to refugees and people in humanitarian need outside their home country (and outside Australia); and*
- *the onshore component, reserved for people who arrive in Australia lawfully, seek protection, and are found to engage Australia's protection obligations.*

Australia is the only resettlement country to link onshore refugee grants and offshore resettlement places in one program. The number of people seeking protection in Australia each year can vary largely, due to factors such as the onset of global conflicts or political instability in other countries.

For several years, onshore protection visas have been issued within a pre-determined cap for example, 1,650 visas each year from 2018-2020, exactly 2,000 visas in 2022-23, and just over 4,000 visas for 2024-25. This approach means that increases in onshore protection visa grants directly reduces the number of places available for refugees awaiting resettlement overseas.

Over the years, there have been ongoing calls from organisations across the nation to break the link between the onshore protection visa program and the offshore Humanitarian Program, particularly to ensure the safety of refugees found to meet Australia's international protection obligations. De-linking offshore resettlement and onshore protection is an important step in allowing Australia to meaningfully respond to record-level refugee resettlement needs while also responding flexibly to new and emerging humanitarian crises.



Health and wellbeing: a critical enabler to positive settlement outcomes

The Australian Government's Multicultural Framework Review *Towards Fairness: A multicultural Australia for all* identified that strong planning and coordination between immigration policy and the provision of the physical and social infrastructure and services – including housing, health, education and transport – is fundamental to creating a socially cohesive, multicultural society¹.

“Every person is Australia no matter what background, no matter what kind of culture, what kind of religion, everyone needs health prioritised in their life.”

F., Community Advisory Group Member,
Refugee Women's Health Community Consultation Project

Additionally, the Department of Home Affairs' *Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework* (Appendix 1) has identified health and wellbeing as a critical domain to facilitate settlement of refugees and humanitarian entrants in Australian society². Seen as a critical enabler to active engagement and settlement in Australia, *health and wellbeing* has been identified as being intrinsically linked to other settlement outcomes including, but not limited to, economic participation, housing and education.

To achieve positive health and settlement outcomes, *the Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework* identifies that refugee and humanitarian entrants coming through the Humanitarian Program require suitably tailored responses that respond to their specific health needs.

*“We recognise that refugee and humanitarian entrants often present with health needs that differ from the mainstream Australian population, and **require suitably tailored and resourced responses**, including around trauma recovery and mental health.”*

Australian Government Department of Home Affairs,
The Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework

¹ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (2024). *Towards fairness: A multicultural Australia for all*. <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/settlement-policy-and-reform/refugee-and-humanitarian-entrant-settlement-and-integration-outcomes-framework>

² Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (2024). *Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework*. <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/settlement-policy-and-reform/refugee-and-humanitarian-entrant-settlement-and-integration-outcomes-framework>



Recommendation 3. Ensure comprehensive pre-arrival assessments (PAAs) of Humanitarian Program entrants provide accurate, up-to-date information to facilitate effective and efficient onshore health and settlement responses

Effective and efficient health and settlement responses for Humanitarian Program entrants require the provision of comprehensive, accurate and up-to-date pre-arrival assessment information to onshore service providers.

In 2024, the Australian Government conducted consultation sessions to discuss the reform of the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) and Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO) Program – programs designed to ensure positive settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants. Within these consultations, comprehensive pre-arrival assessments (PAAs) were identified as an important factor in the provision of the Humanitarian Settlement Program.

Through engagement in various sector network meetings, the Victorian Refugee Health Network has heard ongoing reports from the health and settlement sector that current pre-arrival assessments uploaded on HAPLITE (system for electronic medical records, provided to onshore health and settlement workers), do not accurately represent the health needs of individuals arriving to Australia through the Humanitarian Program and consequently, impact the responses provided by onshore service providers.

Pre-arrival assessment information uploaded on HAPLITE, are reported to be inaccurate, out-of-date, or truncated, preventing health and settlement workers from being able to respond to health and settlement needs in an effective and efficient manner. Specifically, inaccurate or incomplete information of the following can pose significant challenges for onshore health and settlement service providers:

- immediate health needs and required support services;
- self-reported health needs or emerging issues;
- mobility needs and requirements for aids and equipment;
- functional abilities, disability needs and eligibility for service access; and
- medication needs.

Vignette 1. *Inaccurate pre-arrival assessment information uploaded to HAPLITE*

58-year-old client arrived in Australia. Pre-arrival assessment information provided via HAPLITE indicate the client's vision and hearing as 'normal'. Client is legally blind and has hearing impairments, requiring assistance upon arrival.

This pre-arrival assessment information provided via HAPLITE is not an accurate representation of the situation at hand, impacting the effectiveness and efficiency of health and settlement responses by onshore service providers.

Case study provided by Statewide Facilitator of Victoria's Refugee Health Program



Recommendation 4. Recognise that Humanitarian Program entrants, particularly those with significant health and disability needs, require timely access to suitably tailored and resourced health and settlement responses

Recommendation 5. Establish facilitated pathways for Humanitarian Program entrants to access institutions (e.g. National Disability Insurance Scheme, MyAgedCare) within Australian society

Preventive and early intervention health services that are timely, comprehensive, appropriate and effective, support better overall health and wellbeing. However, accessing and navigating health services, systems and institutions can be a complex journey for people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. In Victoria, refugees and humanitarian entrants' access to health services and systems are impacted by a range of intersecting and compounding factors, including but not limited to:

- knowledge and understanding of the Australian health system;
- knowledge and understanding of other systems and services (e.g. *transportation*);
- pre-arrival migration experiences;
- exposure and/or experience of torture and trauma;
- language and literacy;
- culture;
- gender;
- access to personal and medical documentation;
- finances; and
- housing stability.

These compounding and intersecting factors create challenges in accessing appropriate healthcare in a timely manner. In addition to suitably tailored and resourced health and settlement responses for Humanitarian Program entrants, **timely access to health support** must be prioritised to ensure that one's dignity, respect and human rights are upheld.

Vignette 3. *Intersecting and compounding factors impacting access health services and systems*

“Client is a 67-year-old Karenni man who is isolated and lives with severe PTSD. He has no means of transport and doesn’t speak English. He lives in poverty. He is unable to access transport to see a psychologist. He is unable to access NDIS because that requires evidence from a psychologist, and he is unable to find a psychologist who is willing to provide a report for NDIS.” – General Practitioner

Quote provided by General Practitioner, originally published in report by Victorian Refugee Health Network: Key Issues in Access to Mental Health Care for Refugee Background Communities (2023)

The Australian Government’s *Multicultural Framework Review* identified that achieving true health equity in Australia requires dismantling systemic barriers that disproportionately impact communities from diverse backgrounds. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort between government, healthcare providers and community organisations, with a focus on culturally sensitive solutions and improved access to services.



In addition to *health and wellbeing*, the Framework also identified *access to institutions* as another key domain for positive settlement outcomes, recognising the importance of supporting refugees and humanitarian entrants to interact with and benefit from institutions within Australian society. The Framework also recognises “*the changes institutions and agencies can make to support refugees to access and receive goods and services and recognises the role of capacity building work needed to support institutions adapt services to refugee needs*”.

Vignette 3. Health access and navigation challenges faced by Humanitarian Program entrants

“Current client has cerebral palsy, no motor control and requires 24-hour support from her family. She is unable to sit safely in a wheelchair and spends most of her day on the floor or on the couch. The family arrived end of May and is still without any formal Occupational Therapy assessment or services in place. Both client and mother extremely isolated as they are unable to leave the house as client is unable to be transported safely.”

Case study provided by Settlement Service Worker, VRHN Sector Survey on Service Responses regarding key access issues for refugees and people seeking asylum with a disability in Victoria (2022)

In recent years the Victorian Refugee Health Network has consistently received reports from the health and community sector regarding Humanitarian Program entrants arriving with more complex health and settlement needs, many requiring more specialised case management and health support. It is critical that a humanitarian protection focus should encompass the flexibility and responsiveness to adapt to priority needs. Improving coordination and facilitation of service pathways, particularly those that cross state and commonwealth service jurisdictions, will assist in meeting this need.

Vignette 2. Barriers to accessing institutions in Australian society

“Young person late teens, the school thought it was a language barrier as to why she was struggling. After she moved onto another school and over a year on a waitlist for a school psych assessment, she was given diagnoses of an IQ of 62.

I helped her access NDIS...but her and her family did not have any understanding of the system. NDIS did not use interpreter for the meeting or offer one. The support co-ordinator arranged her to have occupational therapy and psychology but she did not turn up to most appointments and couldn't describe what they were for. NDIS sent out a review letter which the family didn't respond to, so NDIS was cancelled.”

Case study provided by Settlement Service Worker, VRHN Sector Survey on Service Responses regarding key access issues for refugees and people seeking asylum with a disability in Victoria (2022)

To promote the sustainability of health and settlement service providers, it is recommended that formalised partnerships are established between Department of Home Affairs and institutions in Australian society (e.g. National Disability Insurance Scheme, MyAgedCare, Care Finder Program) to help ease access and service navigation barriers for Humanitarian Program entrants.



These formalised partnerships can alleviate the current constraints placed on health and settlement workers and allow for tailored support to facilitate Humanitarian Program entrants to access programs and services that promote positive health and wellbeing. Given *health and wellbeing*'s intrinsic link to other settlement outcomes, this will support Humanitarian Program entrants to contribute to the economic, social and cultural fabric of Australia on a broader scale.



Conclusion

With record levels of forced displacement, ongoing instability and a reduction of resettlement places around the world, it is imperative that Australia continues its Humanitarian Program and avoids reductions to resettlement places.

The Victorian Refugee Health Network recognises the importance of Australia's Humanitarian Program, particularly in the context of broader global resettlement. To achieve successful settlement outcomes, focused efforts must also be made to ensure that there are timely, tailored and resourced responses to support the health and wellbeing for all humanitarian entrants.

Australia's Humanitarian Program showcases the nation's global responsibilities in global humanitarian needs and focus on promoting positive health and wellbeing among humanitarian program entrants will not only achieve positive settlement outcomes for participants, but also the broader Australian community, supporting stronger social cohesion, economic participation, and mutual prosperity.

References

- Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (2024). Towards fairness: A multicultural Australia for all. <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/settlement-policy-and-reform/refugee-and-humanitarian-entrant-settlement-and-integration-outcomes-framework>
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This report was produced by the Victorian Refugee Health Network. For further information or enquiries, please contact refugeehealth@foundationhouse.org.au



Appendix 1.

Department of Home Affairs: The Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework

Visualisation of the Integration Outcomes Framework

