

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

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The Settlement Policy and Coordination Section
Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
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**ECCV Submission to the Discussion Paper,
*Measures to Improve Settlement Outcomes for Humanitarian Entrants***

1. ECCV welcomes the Discussion Paper, *Measures to Improve Settlement Outcomes for Humanitarian Entrants* (the Discussion Paper) and the Government's acknowledgement that our recent refugees, particularly from Africa, face significant settlement challenges that require more carefully targeted assistance. ECCV has serious concerns with the section of the Discussion Paper that seeks to restrict the special humanitarian program component of our humanitarian program. ECCV believes that refugees settle best when they can do so with close family members who are also refugees. The Special Humanitarian Program has the flexibility to enable this to happen. The proposed changes would restrict refugee reunion processes for new refugees to the detriment of the effective settlement of refugees in Australia.

2. Non-English speaking refugees, particularly from Africa, face huge settlement challenges in Australia. Many come from long periods in refugee camps, have suffered severe trauma or torture, have very limited education if any education at all and may have spent long periods of time living in third world hardship. Unlike earlier migrants from Europe or Asia, some African refugees do not have any cultural reference points to enable them to connect with Australian society in a reasonable period of time. Expecting such refugees to integrate quickly into Australia's lifestyle is unrealistic. Therefore ECCV welcomes the proposals to strengthen programs to assist refugees to settle in Australia.

3. ECCV welcomes the proposal for complex case support to provide specialist intervention to humanitarian entrants with complex needs. With regard to the questions around complex case support network function, ECCV believes the functions should definitely be extended to provide enhanced basic advice and assistance to new humanitarian entrants regarding basic living skills in Australia around issues such as housing, money handling, shopping, transport and telecommunications. Many African refugees come from third world backgrounds often after long periods in refugee camps. Their ability to integrate into Australian society is severely inhibited by their lack of knowledge or understanding of basic living skills in an advanced Western society. As well as dealing with crisis management, complex case management should comprehensively address this fundamental issue. ECCV agrees with the target group of complex case support of humanitarian entrants and those released from detention with special needs.

4. ECCV welcomes any moves to expand and strengthen the offshore cultural orientation program (AUSCO), although notes that the paper is light on detail in this regard. There should be greater resources provided to AUSCO to prevent occurrences of 'culture shock' among new refugees, particularly from Africa. This program should also ensure that refugees' expectations of life in Australia is realistic and that refugees are aware of housing, living and employment conditions and challenges for new settlers in Australia. New humanitarian entrants should be provided with basic

advice on life in Australia and assistance with very basic English to enable people to meet and greet.

5. ECCV has serious concerns with the section of the Discussion Paper dealing with special humanitarian program proposers and seeking to restrict proposers through requirements around employment, minimum residency periods, financial literacy training and limits on frequency of proposals. ECCV believes that the Discussion Paper has not provided any evidence or data regarding any alleged failures of the existing proposers' framework.

6. The paper states the new proposer measures "will reduce the risk of proposers not being able to further provide an adequate level of initial support to new arrivals". Firstly, the paper does not elaborate on whether this is currently occurring and to what degree. Secondly the special humanitarian program is designed to provide some flexibility around Australia's refugee intake so that people subject to gross violation of their human rights and not referred by UNHCR may enter Australia under the humanitarian program if they have an established proposer. For refugee communities, this has meant that families have been able to reunite in Australia. This assists greatly with the settlement and adjustment process.

7. A proposer has to pay for travel costs and initial accommodation so by their very nature a proposer must have some financial wherewithal. Insisting on minimum periods of employment, residency, financial literacy and limits of frequency of proposals will effectively restrict refugee communities reuniting with their loved ones. This is because minimum periods of employment and residency are by their very nature not necessarily a part of a refugees experience in their first few years in a new homeland. Refugees often change address and employment as they gravitate towards areas where they feel comfortable and can find employment.

8. Rather than criticising proposers for allegedly not providing adequate support to new arrivals the Government could provide more resources itself to assist special humanitarian project entrants. Special humanitarian project entrants make up a small component of Australia's immigration program at 6,585 entrants in 2004-05. Further assistance to this category of immigrants would be unlikely to have any noticeable effect on our large federal budget and would be justified on humanitarian grounds.

9. If it was determined restrictions had to be placed on the SHP program ECCV would prefer that consideration be given to restricting the category of eligible SHP applicants perhaps only to the immediate family of proposers (e.g. siblings, spouses, parents and children), rather than placing restrictions on proposers. As a general principle any restrictions on providing opportunities for refugees to reunite with their immediate refugee families would be detrimental to the successful settlement of refugees in Australia. Such restrictions should be avoided at all costs.

10. The proposal to extend the role of the volunteer sector needs further consideration. This could be considered cost-shifting by the government of settlement support to the volunteer sector which is often inadequately resourced. The capacity of some volunteer organisations over the longer term is also open to question.

11. In conclusion, ECCV supports the Discussion Paper's proposals to strengthen the case management framework for humanitarian entrants but believes the case for restricting the proposers system under the Special Humanitarian Program has not been demonstrated.