



Australia's Humanitarian Program 2025-26: ECCV Submission

AUGUST 2025

About ECCV

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) is the peak body for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Victoria. ECCV works closely with more than 250 member organisations including ethnic associations, multicultural service providers, and regional ethnic communities' councils.

ECCV has been advocating for human rights, freedom, respect, equality and dignity for migrant and refugee communities, and for a socially cohesive and inclusive Victorian community, since 1974.

ECCV has a strong record of informing industry, practice and influencing Federal, State and Local governments to promote culturally responsive approaches and equitable access to services, anti-racism and socially just policy.

Acknowledgements

ECCV would like to gratefully acknowledge Foundation House for sharing its expertise to assist in the preparation of this paper.

Suggested citation

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) (2025). Australia's Humanitarian Program 2025-26. Melbourne, Australia.



ECCV acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to their Elders past and present.

Key Recommendations

1. The Federal Government plan for a progressive annual increase in the size of Australia's humanitarian program, with view to offering 27,000 places by 2028-29.
2. The onshore and offshore protection intakes are separated, with no cap on the onshore humanitarian intake.
3. The Federal Government begin progressively increasing the refugee intake through complementary pathways to 10,000 per year, in addition to the overall humanitarian intake.
4. The Special Humanitarian Program prioritises processing of refugees based on those who are in greatest need and who are an immediate or close family member of an Australian resident or citizen.
5. The Federal Government consult with relevant stakeholders, the UNHCR, multicultural peak bodies and refugee communities to review the definition of 'family' used to assess reunification applications.
6. The Administrative Review Tribunal be allowed flexibility in applying the 28-day deadline for people seeking review of protection decisions.
7. The Federal Government enshrine in law a '90-day rule' processing time limit for protection applications.
8. The Federal Government ensure full and equitable access to legal and migration advice to support asylum seekers in navigating the legal system.
9. People holding bridging visas while their protection claims are assessed are provided with ongoing rights to work and study.
10. An additional 5,000 places in the offshore Humanitarian Program are provided annually to Palestinians fleeing Gaza for the duration of this conflict.
11. The Federal Government review the funding allocated to regional settlement services given the greater level of capacity-building work required to ensure successful settlement for refugees in regional Australia.
12. The Federal Government take a place-based approach to regional settlement by working closely with settlement providers to regularly review and monitor service gaps, workforce needs, and the availability of appropriate local supports, amenities and programs.

Introduction

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Government's Humanitarian Program 2025-26.

ECCV is the peak representative body for multicultural communities in Victoria, with a membership of more than 250 organisations in its network. We are engaged in policy and advocacy, capacity building and community consultation with and for Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Humanitarian entrants have made up a significant part of Australia's post-war migration intake and have brought immense social, cultural and economic benefits to our communities. It is critical that Australia's Humanitarian Program provides certainty, support and durable protection to refugees as they settle and begin their life in Australia.

ECCV acknowledges that the Albanese Government has introduced several substantive reforms to improve the nation's refugee policy and architecture. These changes come at a time when Australia accepts its one millionth refugee since the Second World War, and include the following:

- Lifting the annual humanitarian intake to a fixed 20,000 places, after several years of variable intake between 13,750 and 20,000 places.
- Making the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP) a permanent part of Australia's Humanitarian Program.
- Addressing the systemic challenge posed by the so-called "legacy caseload" by introducing a permanent Resolution of Status Visa. This caseload encompassed people seeking asylum who arrived by boat more than a decade ago and whose legal residency was anchored to a succession of wholly unsatisfactory temporary visas. In a welcome development as of 31 May 2025, 20,277 people have now been granted the Resolution of Status Visa, and temporary protection has largely been eliminated as a response to people seeking asylum in Australia.

ECCV is also pleased to see that the Administrative Review Tribunal has replaced the Immigration Assessment Authority (part of the former Administrative Appeals Tribunal) as the body conducting independent merits reviews of decisions related to the refusal or cancellation of protection visas. This ensures that people seeking protection receive the same substantive and procedural rights as anyone else seeking review of a government decision.

Global Context

In recent years, Australia has also shown willingness to respond to particular humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, Ukraine and Palestine/Israel. Responses have included temporary and permanent visa allocations as well as financial assistance, legal aid, skills recognition and counselling services.

ECCV is deeply concerned about other legacy aspects of refugee policy, notably the situation of 130 asylum seekers who travelled by sea and remain offshore in Nauru and Manus Island, as well as approximately 9,000 people on bridging visas who are without work rights.

There is no doubt that refugees make significant contributions to the Australian economy, particularly through entrepreneurship and workforce participation. They are often more likely to start businesses than people born in Australia, contributing to job creation and economic

growth.¹ Furthermore, refugees fill labour shortages, boost productivity, and contribute to innovation. Many studies have shown the economic benefits that refugees bring to Australia.² Modelling suggests that increasing Australia's humanitarian intake would have a significant positive economic impact, driven largely by contributions that humanitarian migrants make to labour supply, aggregate demand and filling skills shortages in essential sectors such as health and ageing.³

The 2024-25 period has seen unprecedented pressures placed on the global humanitarian system and, upholding its best traditions as a welcoming multicultural nation, Australia must show the compassion and flexibility that the current situation demands. For example, ECCV has heard from Lebanese-Australian and Sudanese-Australian communities about challenges in accessing humanitarian support for displaced members of their communities overseas.

Overall, the number of people forcibly displaced from their homes globally has increased significantly over the past three years. According to the UNHCR, 123 million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2024.⁴ The situation is likely to become worse as the USA seems likely to completely cease its refugee intake under the Trump Administration. The USA has also dramatically cut its level of international aid to bodies like the UNHCR, which means more vulnerable people will be in need of support. There is therefore likely to be a significant decrease in the number of people resettled worldwide in the coming years.

ECCV believes this scenario offers Australia an opportunity and platform to step up and show leadership which will resonate globally and enhance our reputation in the Asia-Pacific region.

Composition of Program

ECCV acknowledges that a decision has already been made to maintain the size of Australia's Humanitarian Program at 20,000 places in 2025-26. However, we also note that in its 2023 National Platform, the ALP stated that "Labor aspires to progressively increase Australia's government funded humanitarian intake to 27,000 places per year".⁵ ECCV believes that such an increase would be a welcome response to current events, and strongly urges that plans are put in place to progressively increase the size of the program in the coming years, with a view to offering 27,000 places by 2028-29. Such an increase will bring Australia in line with other countries and be consistent with its international commitments and obligations.

¹ Centre for Policy Development, 'Seven Steps to SUCCESS' (April 2019) <https://cpd.org.au/work/seven-steps-to-success-refugee-entrepreneurs/#:~:text=Seven%20Steps%20to%20SUCCESS%20has,related%20services%20across%20the%20board>.

² See e.g. The Guardian (28 August 2019), 'Raising Australia's refugee intake would boost economy by billions, Oxfam says' <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/aug/28/raising-australias-refugee-intake-would-boost-economy-by-billions-oxfam-says> and Centre for Policy Development, 'Seven Steps to SUCCESS' (April 2019).

³ Deloitte, 'Economic and social impact of increasing Australia's humanitarian intake' (August 2019) <https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/economics/articles/economic-social-impact-increasing-australias-humanitarian-intake.html>

⁴ UNHCR, 'Global Trends' (12 June 2025). <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>

⁵ Australian Labor Party National Platform 2023, p.138. <https://www.alp.org.au/media/3569/2023-alp-national-platform.pdf>

Recommendation 1. The Federal Government plan for a progressive annual increase in the size of Australia's humanitarian program, with view to offering 27,000 places by 2028-29.

Australia's capacity to adequately respond to the currently heightened need for refugee resettlement is hampered by our continued practice of allocating onshore protection visas from the overall Humanitarian Program allocation. Therefore, every visa offered through onshore protection results in one less visa being allocated to a refugee identified by the UNHCR in the offshore program. It is time to separate the onshore allocation from the overall quota. The onshore allocation should be uncapped to ensure protection visas can be issued as required to all people currently in Australia who are found to meet our international protection obligations.

Similarly, all humanitarian visas offered through complementary pathways should be separated from the overall humanitarian intake quota. The ALP's 2023 National Platform stated that "Labor will progressively increase the complementary resettlement intake to 10,000 places per year",⁶ and the Government re-stated this commitment at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023. The Government needs a coherent and principled Complementary Pathways Program to increase community sponsored, skills-based and family reunion pathways, and to meet its commitment to provide 10,000 places per year.

Places in complementary programs like the Community Support Program, Refugee Student Settlement Pathway Pilot and CRISP should also be additional to the 20,000 Humanitarian Program allocation.

Eligibility for the Humanitarian Program should be based on vulnerability and need, and should be non-discriminatory. However, the Community Support Program discriminates on the basis of ethnicity, country of origin, country of asylum, English language skills and employability. It should be reformed into a genuine community sponsorship program, complementary to the main Humanitarian Program, for refugees identified by the UNHCR as being in the greatest need.

Recommendation 2. The onshore and offshore protection intakes are separated with no cap on the onshore humanitarian intake.

Recommendation 3. The Federal Government begin progressively increasing the refugee intake through complementary pathways to 10,000 per year in addition to the overall humanitarian intake.

Family Reunion

Family reunification is an important protective factor for newly arrived migrants and refugees. Families provide an effective support network for refugees making the difficult adjustment to a new

⁶ Australian Labor Party National Platform 2023, p.138. <https://www.alp.org.au/media/3569/2023-alp-national-platform.pdf>

life, strengthening their capacity to function in a new country.⁷ This reduces social costs in the long-term. Australia is a signatory to the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the Global Compact on Refugees, which commit host countries to facilitating flexible pathways for reuniting with family. Despite this, humanitarian migrants and refugees who settle in Australia have limited opportunities for family reunification. Current policy has underestimated the importance of family for the wellbeing and productivity of migrants and refugees, and to their significance in facilitating successful integration into Australian society.

The Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) is the main pathway for refugees seeking to reunite with family. However, demand currently far outstrips supply. Other visa streams in our migration program provide family reunion options for permanent visa-holders, but access to these is difficult due to prohibitive sponsorship costs, unrealistic evidentiary requirements, and long waiting periods (up to 30 years).

The Special Humanitarian Program, like all family visas in the Australian migration program, operates under restrictive definitions of ‘family’ that often disregard cultural differences and understandings of ‘family’ that may stem from the refugee experience. For example, refugees from various households may depend on each other for mutual support and survival throughout their resettlement journey, and this can give rise to a variety of family configurations that are not recognised under current criteria.

Recommendation 4. The Special Humanitarian Program prioritises processing of refugees based on those who are in greatest need and who are an immediate or close family member of an Australian resident or citizen.

Recommendation 5. The Federal Government consult with relevant stakeholders, the UNHCR, multicultural peak bodies and refugee communities to review the definition of ‘family’ used to assess reunification applications.

Decision-Making

ECCV applauds the passage of the Administrative Review Tribunal Bill through Parliament last year. This abolished the Immigration Assessment Authority (part of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal) and replaced it with the Administrative Review Tribunal (ART), therefore ending the “fast track” assessment of asylum claims. As the Refugee Council of Australia notes, the Immigration Assessment Authority often failed to provide procedural fairness, including limited opportunities for applicants to present their cases fully and a lack of proper consideration of new evidence.

However, there are still provisions in the laws governing the Administrative Review Tribunal that unfairly impact the capacity of asylum applicants to have their claims fairly heard. In particular, asylum seekers who have been denied a protection visa by the Department of Home Affairs have a

⁷ Rebecca Wickes et al., ‘The social impact of family separation on refugee settlement and inclusion in Australia’ (September 2019) https://arts.monash.edu/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1959123/Oxfam-Monash-report-family-separation-September2019.pdf

strict 28-day deadline to apply for a review of the decision by the ART, beginning from the date of the Department's decision. The ART is unable to extend this deadline for reviewable migration and protection decisions, although it can extend deadlines for other types of applications. ECCV believes that there should be flexibility in this deadline to allow for that fact asylum seekers often face additional obstacles to seeking review, such as language barriers, insecure housing and employment.

Protracted processing times continue to hinder the operation of Australia's Humanitarian Program. The most recently available data shows that applications for permanent protection visas now take an average of 793 days to be processed.⁸ The ALP's 2023 National Platform committed to reintroducing a '90-day rule', whereby all protection visa applications would be processed within 90 days.⁹

Recommendation 6. The Administrative Review Tribunal be allowed flexibility in applying the 28-day deadline for people seeking review of protection decisions.

Recommendation 7. The Federal Government enshrine in law a '90-day rule' processing time limit for protection applications.

Legal and Work Rights

It is imperative that all people seeking asylum in Australia are provided with funded legal and migration advice to ensure that they are afforded procedural fairness (which if denied can give rise to judicial review, further straining the court system) and can effectively access and navigate a complex legal system. This is particularly important because people seeking asylum may experience additional barriers related to language and culture, and trauma and vulnerability.

ECCV welcomes the Government's announcement in October 2023 of a \$160 million package to address the backlog in processing and reviewing onshore protection visa applications, which included over \$48 million for legal assistance services to support applicants through the application process.¹⁰ The Government must commit to ongoing funding to ensure that all people seeking asylum can continue to access free legal advice.

Recommendation 8. The Federal Government ensure full and equitable access to legal and migration advice to support asylum seekers in navigating the legal system.

Many protection visa claimants in Australia do not have the right to work or study while their claims are assessed. Senate Estimates show that as of December 2024, there are 9,000 people on bridging

⁸ Refugee Council of Australia, 'Statistics on people seeking asylum in the community' (10 August 2025) <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/asylum-community/5/>

⁹ Australian Labor Party National Platform 2023, p.141. <https://www.alp.org.au/media/3569/2023-alp-national-platform.pdf>

¹⁰ The Hon Andrew Giles MP. <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/AndrewGiles/Pages/restoring-integrity-protection-system.aspx>.

visas without work rights.¹¹ Many bridging visas also contain condition 8207 (no study) or condition 8201 (maximum 3 months study).

Denying work rights forces asylum seekers into poverty and destitution, as they lack access to income support and are unable to support themselves. Lack of work and financial instability exacerbate existing mental health issues, leading to isolation and further exclusion from the community. Without work rights, asylum seekers face significant barriers in rebuilding their lives and contributing to Australian society, even when they possess valuable skills and experience. Conversely, allowing asylum seekers to work can contribute to the economy and reduce reliance on government support.

Recommendation 9. People holding bridging visas while their protection claims are assessed are provided with ongoing rights to work and study.

Crisis Responses

ECCV applauds the Australian Government's swift responses to the crises in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Palestine/Israel, creating avenues for people impacted by these conflicts to resettle in Australia. It is important to recognise that other countries continue to experience significant and protracted upheaval and must be kept on the agenda for resettlement.

However, we are concerned that the response to the conflict in Gaza that has been raging since October 2023 has consisted only of visitor visas, and since October 2024, Temporary Humanitarian Stay visas available on a case-by-case basis to Palestinian and Israeli temporary visa holders currently in Australia.

Humanitarian visas have not been made available to Palestinians fleeing the conflict in Gaza. To provide fairness and equitable treatment, Palestinians fleeing the current conflict should be eligible for additional humanitarian visas, as was the case of people fleeing conflicts in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Recommendation 10. An additional 5,000 places in the offshore Humanitarian Program are provided annually to Palestinians fleeing Gaza for the duration of this conflict.

Regional settlement

Regional settlement has been a central component of the Humanitarian Program in recent years. The Australian Government's long-term policy has been to promote settlement and population growth in regional centres, through both the Humanitarian Program and the Migration Program. Growing attention has been paid to filling population and skills shortages in regional Australia, in recognition of the opportunity that migration provides in helping regional communities grow and flourish.

ECCV works closely with members and stakeholders based in regional Victoria and is uniquely positioned to provide advice on matters that affect settlement in those locations. Our regional partners regularly highlight issues related to systemic problems, including concerns about housing

¹¹ Additional Estimates February 2025, QON AE25-377.

affordability, pull factors for employment, and the resourcing and coordination of settlement assistance services.

ECCV stakeholders report that housing affordability and availability is the most significant challenge for new arrivals settling in regional Victoria. With this comes increased challenges for mental health, financial security, and family violence. Increased relocation of people from capital cities to the regions, for lifestyle and flexible remote work purposes has put severe pressure on the housing market.

Pressure on local rental markets makes it difficult for new arrivals to locate housing within an affordable price range. Settlement services are unable to solve these issues as they relate to systemic policy failures that favour private property ownership, and the absence of a coherent plan at state and national levels to increase the supply of affordable and accessible housing. In some regions, the cost of housing is not only prohibitive, but the resourcing of housing services is also limited, with many too under-resourced to meet demand.

Other pressures and challenges include:

- Lack of proper infrastructure and services, including schools, reliable transport and health infrastructure.
- Access to affordable and regular early years education and childcare. Adult clients experience difficulties with finding suitable and affordable childcare while attending English classes.
- Long wait times for general practitioners, with some clinics not taking on new clients.
- Lack of resourcing for services to provide migrants and refugees with enough support to address all their individual needs.
- Decline in sustainable employment opportunities.
- Isolation and difficulty making meaningful connections with the community during the pandemic, the after-effects of which are still being felt for new arrivals.

These challenges highlight the need for a place-based approach to settlement, which involves addressing settlement needs at the local level, and in a manner that is tailored to different regional locations. New arrivals must have access to the support required to successfully integrate and transition to living in a new country.

Secondary migration is unstructured and difficult to respond to through existing funding streams. Once the Australian Government has identified a regional location as an area of settlement, its suitability must be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis.

The Australian Government must thoroughly review those locations, in consultation with the settlement sector and regional communities, to determine local workforce needs, assess the availability of appropriate housing, and identify service gaps (such the availability of interpreters), response strategies, and community attitudes towards migrants. Such measures will help ensure that settlement supports in regional communities are effective, efficient and responsive to local needs. The presence of strong, adequately resourced and well-established settlement services is essential to meeting the settlement needs of regional communities and must be prioritised by the Australian Government.

Recommendation 11. The Federal Government review the funding allocated to regional settlement services given the greater level of capacity-building work required to ensure successful settlement for refugees in regional Australia.

Recommendation 12. The Federal Government take a place based approach to regional settlement by working closely with settlement providers to regularly review and monitor service gaps, workforce needs, and the availability of appropriate local supports, amenities and programs.

For more information about this submission, email ECCV CEO Farah Farouque: ceo@eccv.org.au