

Australia's Humanitarian Program 2026-27: ECCV Submission

March 2026

Introduction

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Government's Humanitarian Program 2026-27.

Global displacement has reached historic levels, which is a great concern to many in our multicultural communities. An estimated 122 million people worldwide are currently forcibly displaced due to conflict, persecution and instability.¹ Australia has a strong record of providing durable protection to refugees while supporting successful settlement outcomes. Maintaining and strengthening this record requires a humanitarian program that is responsive to global need and supports long-term integration.

ECCV welcomes recent reforms to Australia's humanitarian migration framework, including the stabilisation of the humanitarian intake at 20,000 places and necessary reforms to the protection visa system.

However, escalating global displacement requires a strengthened and more flexible response.

We urge the Australian Government to show strong leadership and lean into our best traditions as a generous, welcoming nation.

Key recommendations:

- 1. Plan for a progressive annual increase in the size of Australia's humanitarian program, with a view to offering 27,000 places by 2029-30.**
- 2. Provide an additional 5000 places in the offshore Humanitarian Program for people displaced by current conflicts in the Middle East.**
- 3. Separate onshore protection visas from the capped humanitarian intake, with no cap applied to onshore humanitarian visas.**
- 4. Progressively increase refugee intake through complementary pathways to 10,000 per year, in addition to the core humanitarian intake.**
- 5. Prioritise Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) processing for those in the greatest need and who are close family members of an Australian resident or citizen.**

¹ UNHCR, Global Displacement Figures at a Glance, 2025.

6. Review the definition of 'family' used to assess reunification applications, in consultation with UNHCR, multicultural peak bodies, and refugee communities.
7. Ensure full and equitable access to legal and migration advice for asylum seekers while their claims are processed.
8. Provide asylum seekers on bridging visas with full work and study rights while their claims are processed, enabling them to support themselves and contribute to the community.
9. Maintain a strong Refugee stream within the offshore program (75–80%), with 20–25% allocated to the SHP.
10. Reform the Community Support Program so it operates as a genuine community sponsorship pathway with additional places beyond the core intake.
11. Sustain investment in settlement services, particularly in regional areas where housing, workforce and infrastructure constraints can affect settlement success.
12. Expedite the relocation to Australia of the remaining people seeking asylum in Nauru and PNG.

Global Context

Forced displacement has increased significantly over the past decade. The UNHCR estimates that approximately 122 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide in 2025. Despite this, fewer than 1% of refugees worldwide are resettled through formal resettlement programs each year. Australia's Humanitarian Program therefore plays a critical role in global protection efforts.

Refugees make a strong contribution to Australian society. Evidence shows that humanitarian migrants demonstrate high rates of entrepreneurship and strong labour force participation over time and contribute to regional economic development.²

Composition of the Humanitarian Program

ECCV acknowledges that a decision has already been made to maintain the size of Australia's Humanitarian Program at 20,000 places in 2026-27. However, we believe the Australian Government should embrace a progressive increase to 27,000 places annually by 2029-30. This is in line with the 2023 Australian Labor Party National Platform.³ Such an increase would be an appropriate response to current global events and the historic levels of displacement.

Australia's current approach – counting onshore protection visas within the capped Humanitarian Program intake – limits its capacity to respond effectively to current resettlement needs.

Onshore and offshore components should be separated to ensure Australia can meet its international protection obligations while maintaining a strong offshore resettlement program.

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 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>

³ Australian Labor Party National Platform 2023, p.138. <https://www.alp.org.au/media/3569/2023-alp-national-platform.pdf>

Similarly, all humanitarian visas offered through complementary pathways such as the Community Support Program and Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP) should operate in addition to, not within, the capped intake.

ECCV supports expanding these pathways to 10,000 places annually, in line with the 2023 Australian Labor Party National Platform.⁴

ECCV supports maintaining a strong focus on resettling those in greatest need through the offshore program, with the following approximate distribution:

- 75 - 80% allocated to the refugee stream
- 20 - 25% to the Special Humanitarian Program

This approach ensures that Australia prioritises individuals facing the most acute protection risks - particularly those referred through UNHCR processes. The Special Humanitarian Program remains an important complementary pathway enabling family reunion and community-supported protection.

Crisis Response

The Australian Government reacted swiftly to humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Palestine/Israel, creating pathways for people affected to seek safety and resettle in Australia. New and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East further underscores the need for Australia to provide flexible and responsive humanitarian pathways for people displaced by conflict.

To ensure fairness and equitable treatment across humanitarian responses, Australia should prepare to provide additional humanitarian visas for those facing persecution, violence and displacement as a result of the current conflict in the Middle East.

Family reunion and the Special Humanitarian Program

Family reunion is central to successful settlement outcomes. Family networks provide critical social, emotional, and practical support, reducing long-term social and economic costs.⁵

The Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) is a critical pathway for family reunion and community-supported protection. Priority should be given to vulnerable groups, including women and children; individuals facing persecution due to religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or political opinion; and people living in protracted refugee situations.

Current SHP definitions of 'family' are overly restrictive and do not reflect cultural norms or the realities of displacement. For example, refugees from various households may depend on each other for mutual support and survival throughout their resettlement journey. Greater flexibility is required to recognise extended and non-traditional family structures that form through shared experiences of displacement and survival.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ 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

Sponsorship arrangements

ECCV considers the existing sponsorship framework broadly appropriate. However, there is scope to allow accredited community organisations or settlement providers to act as co-sponsors, particularly where family members have limited financial capacity. Such arrangements could strengthen community engagement while maintaining appropriate safeguards.

However primary settlement responsibility must remain with government and should not be transferred to individuals. While family members and community networks play an important role in supporting new arrivals, effective settlement outcomes rely on professional settlement services including English language programs, employment support, healthcare and trauma-informed services.

Settlement Services

Settlement services are essential in supporting humanitarian entrants to rebuild their lives and participate fully in Australian society, but rising cost-of-living pressures and increasing service delivery costs are placing increased strain on settlement providers. Sustained investment and effective coordination across government and community sectors are essential to maintain strong settlement outcomes

The first five years post-arrival are critical for successful settlement. Priority services should include English language education, employment and skills programs, health care (including specialised trauma and mental health services), housing support and youth/education services.

Regional settlement offers important economic and social benefits but is constrained by housing shortages, workforce shortages and limited service capacity. ECCV recommends reviewing settlement funding arrangements to ensure that regional communities are adequately resourced to support new arrivals.

Reforming the Community Support Program

The Community Support Program (CSP) was designed to provide an additional pathway for refugees with strong employment prospects and community support. However, it is currently oversubscribed and subject to long processing times, limiting its effectiveness.

A redesigned CSP should operate as a true community sponsorship program, prioritising applicants with strong community support in Australia with additional places beyond the core humanitarian intake. Applicants should be given the opportunity to clearly demonstrate attributes relevant to rapid settlement and economic participation, including employable skills or qualifications, English language capacity or potential, and strong community sponsorship arrangements.

ECCV recommends a community sponsorship model aligned with Canada and the United Kingdom, incorporating accredited sponsor organisations, structured settlement plans and partnerships between community sponsors and settlement providers. Government should remain responsible for core settlement services.

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