



127 Myers St
Geelong 3220
combinedrefugeeactiongroup@gmail.com

Submission to Review of Australia's Refugee Community Sponsorship Program

Combined Refugee Action Group (CRAG) welcomes the Australian Government's decision to review the current Community Support Program for refugees, and appreciates the opportunity to make this submission to the review.

CRAG is based in Geelong, Victoria, and is a network for over 700 individuals and community groups across the Geelong, Bellarine Peninsula and Surf Coast region, all advocating for refugees to be given the opportunity to rebuild their lives in safety.

We acknowledge Australia's long-standing commitment to refugee resettlement, to allow people to find a safe home in Australia. However, we believe that there are a number of issues with the current Refugee Sponsorship Program (CSP) which need to be addressed in order to allow greater community engagement and participation and to harness the energy, enthusiasm and generosity of local communities.

CRAG believes that the CSP should:

- Be made more affordable and accessible
- Provide additional places for refugees to be welcomed into our Australian communities, rather than sponsorship places being included in Australia's existing humanitarian resettlement intake
- Allow community groups, families, and businesses to act as sponsors
- Provide access to appropriate support and services for newly arrived refugees
- Enable family reunification for refugees in Australia who have been separated from their family members
- Offer a safe and timely resettlement pathway for refugees and people seeking asylum currently waiting in countries in our region

Benefits of a community sponsorship program

Australia prides itself on being a multicultural society brimming with diverse communities, activities, languages, cuisine, and strong social cohesion. A community with strong social cohesion is one that is more engaged, and is, according to the Scanlon Foundation, one that fosters a sense of belonging, sense of worth, social justice and equity, participation, and

acceptance¹ (reduced experiences of racism and other forms of discrimination). A community with strong social cohesion has a stronger sense of identity and connection.

Social cohesion can be further strengthened by opening up the opportunities for cities and groups to welcome and bring refugees and other migrants into their communities; involving groups and individuals in the decision-making for the places and spaces they call home. Sponsorship empowers communities to build and expand their diversity and experiences, further building our multiculturalism and making it a real and tangible concept that we are actively engaged in.

Professor Alexander Newman, Associate Dean (International) at Deakin's Faculty of Business and Law, says that organisations and businesses in the Geelong region could obtain significant benefits from employing people from a refugee background:

"They are usually skilled and capable individuals who hold qualifications and practical experience in their home country. They are highly motivated to learn and build up practical experience in Australia.

People with a refugee background often bring new ideas and perspectives into an organisation too. Research on diversity suggests that more diverse workplaces typically have higher levels of innovation, productivity and staff retention. Ultimately, helping people from these groups to integrate into the workplace, as well as supporting them to re-establish their livelihood, builds a stronger community, locally and internationally."²

There is wide support in the Geelong, Bellarine and Surf Coast region for expanding and improving the community sponsorship program.

Humans in Geelong Inc. supports the idea of a more affordable and accessible sponsorship program as a resettlement pathway for refugees.

In the work we do, we find out about, and are connected to, the many support organisations in our region. We are confident that these amazing organisations in our caring community would assist refugees who would arrive through a community sponsorship program.

This sponsorship program would be of huge benefit to our region because it would:

- *Allow local multicultural communities to participate in community and showcase, preserve and share their traditions and culture*
- *Promote cross-cultural awareness and understanding*
- *Enrich both the lives of those who are sponsored and people in our local community*
- *Encourage harmony, empathy and care*

Humans in Geelong Inc. believes that an extended sponsorship program, which would enable local families to reunite with family, friends and loved ones, is extremely important.

*Jacqui Bennett - Coordinator - **Humans in Geelong***

¹ <https://scanlonfoundation.org.au/social-cohesion-pillars/>

² <https://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/media-releases/articles/new-guide-launched-to-help-refugees-into-the-workforce>

Surf Coast Rural Australians for Refugees welcomes the vast opportunities an expanded and improved refugee sponsorship resettlement pathway would provide within our communities.

Refugees living, working and being welcomed within our communities would provide greater understanding in the community regarding the plight of refugees and all they must endure in their quest for safety and a home for themselves and their loved ones. We will do all we are able to support their resettlement.

*Jenny Newton – Treasurer, **Surf Coast Rural Australians for Refugees***

Willingness and capacity in Geelong region communities to engage in refugee sponsorship as a resettlement pathway

The City of Greater Geelong, the Borough of Queenscliff and Surf Coast Shire Council have all declared their municipalities 'Refugee Welcome Zones', and postcodes across Geelong and the Bellarine Peninsula are registered Safe Haven Enterprise Visa areas. The Geelong region also has a strong connection with the Humanitarian Resettlement Program through Settlement Services at Diversitat, our local multicultural services agency. It is our understanding that Diversitat has written to the City of Greater Geelong, outlining its support for an expanded Community Sponsorship Program.

Combined Refugee Action Group acts as an umbrella network which includes representatives from the following organisations who work collaboratively to support refugees and people seeking asylum:

- Aireys Inlet Rural Australians for Refugees (RAR)
- Amnesty Geelong
- Apollo Bay RAR
- Bellarine for Refugees
- Christ Church Social Justice Group
- Corangamite Grandmothers for Refugees
- Deakin University Amnesty
- Deans Marsh RAR
- Geelong Interfaith Network
- Geelong Inter Church Social Justice Network
- Geelong Refugee Information and Advocacy Network (GRAIN)
- Geelong Sisters of Mercy
- Greater Geelong Youth with Refugees
- Nazareth Parish Social Justice Group
- Queenscliff RAR
- Surf Coast RAR
- Trinity Aid for Refugees
- Wesley Church Geelong Justice and Mission Task Group
- St David's Social Justice Committee
- St Bernard's Parish Justice Group

There is strong support from organisations and faith groups like these and in communities in Geelong, the Bellarine Peninsular and the Surf Coast, to welcome refugees and open up community sponsorship as a more accessible resettlement pathway.

The Church Council of St. Davids Uniting Church, Newtown, in conjunction with our Social Justice sub-committee, fully supports a review of the Community Sponsorship Program for refugees, taking into consideration the Canadian model for refugee sponsorship.

We would be open to discussion with the local Combined Refugee Action Group as to ways we may assist families in our region.

*Edwin Haywood – Secretary, **St Davids Uniting Church Newtown***

As the Social Justice Committee member on the St David's Church Council, I certainly support the idea of a community refugee sponsorship policy based on the Canadian model. In fact, the whole Council was in favour of this policy change.

Some years ago, we assisted four young Congolese students who were seeking asylum and who found themselves homeless. At short notice, the Minister temporarily housed them in the Church hall, and provided them with breakfast, use of his bathroom, and a cut lunch in the manse next door. Members of the congregation were rostered to provide them with a hot meal each night. It took ten days to find permanent accommodation and some part-time employment for them in Geelong. Although caught by surprise on that occasion, the congregation responded to the situation it faced as the 'Good Samaritan' did in the parable. Community sponsorship is the Christian response to an asylum seeker.

The St David's Church is well-placed to look after refugees. It is a very busy place during the week as it hosts a dozen community groups from dance classes to quilting. It is also a growing community with an on-line presence under Newtown Uniting Church St David's.

In recent years, the St David's Social Justice Committee, and the Geelong Inter-Church Social Justice Network, have supported the Welcome Place at Wesley Church (the local drop-in Centre for refugees) with regular donations of food and money. I held a weekly two-hour English class on a Wednesday morning there for two years until ill-health intervened. For the year prior, classes were held in the Presbyterian Church hall in Fenwick Street, Geelong. This church also provided a hot meal for up to 100 people, including refugees, every Friday.

In conclusion, I must say the idea of a community refugee sponsorship policy, similar to the Canadian model, has strong support in Geelong.

*Ian Yule – **St David's Uniting Social Justice Committee** member and President, **Geelong Inter-Church Social Justice Network***

As Sisters of Mercy we certainly support a change to a more accessible sponsorship program. Currently the Sisters support refugees in a number of ways and will continue to do so into the future. Anything that would make life more welcoming and wholesome would be of great benefit not only to refugees but also to the wider Australian community.

*Sr Fina Woollcome – **Sisters of Mercy Geelong***

Bellarine for Refugees has always welcomed refugees and asylum seekers to the region whether on a temporary or longer-term basis.

A suitably resourced community sponsorship program could see additional refugees bring benefits to local communities.

Bellarine for Refugees will continue to offer support to refugees and asylum seekers in the Greater Geelong and Barwon region.

*Helen Dwyer - **Bellarine for Refugees***

As the Minister of the Surf Coast Linked Congregations of the Uniting Church I support the policy of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia which states in its preamble:

*“As Christians called to love our neighbour, welcome the stranger, challenge unjust systems and offer refuge and care to those who are marginalised and in exile, we have a particular responsibility in our society when it comes to responding to issues related to asylum seekers and refugees.” **

Members of my congregations are passionate about supporting refugees living in our communities. This is expressed by such means as donations to food banks, donations to refugee legal support, lobbying and protesting to achieve positive government policies and active membership of local refugee support groups.

Torquay Uniting Church congregation hosted an Iranian refugee family for a time, sorting out accommodation and practical needs alongside emotional and monetary assistance.

There is no doubt that refugees coming into our community under a sponsorship program would be welcomed and supported with the same love and generosity of spirit.

Rev Suzie Castle – Minister of the Surf Coast Uniting Churches

** Shelter from the Storm*

*A Uniting Church in Australia Statement on Asylum Seeker & Refugee Policy
Adopted by the Fourteenth Assembly July 2015 Resolution 15.23.09*

Greater participation across the breadth of the community

Under the current CSP, businesses, community organisations or individuals must work with one of only ten Approved Proposing Organisations (APOs) across Australia in order to lodge a visa application for a proposed refugee sponsorship³

The fees charged by these APOs range from just under \$8,000, to up to \$15,500. In some cases, this amount is only for the primary applicant, with further fees being charged for each additional family member. On top of these fees, bonds of up to \$5,000 are charged.⁴

These fees do not include visa application charges, medical assessments, airfares, exit permit fees or other costs. Organisations, businesses or individuals sponsoring refugees must also provide assurance of support to cover income support for the sponsored person for first 12 months of arrival if needed.

The total of these costs is prohibitively high. A more financially accessible program, like the Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Program where community groups, grassroots organisations and groups of individuals are able to gather a mixture of funds and in-kind support, would attract greater participation in local communities. This participation would increase the breadth of community engagement for newly arrived refugees to enrich their connection with, and integration into, their new neighbourhoods.

Queenscliff Rural Australians for Refugees (QRAR) is based on the Bellarine Peninsula near Geelong, Victoria.

QRAR was formed 17 years ago to provide advocacy and support to refugees and people seeking asylum. Our membership is currently at 650, and continues to grow. The Borough of Queenscliffe is now a Refugee Welcome Zone, and has supported and hosted a number of events that bring local residents, refugees and people seeking asylum together in welcome, friendship and support.

We have seen the devastating effects that are created by the ongoing long-term separation of families, and the eroding of mental and physical health suffered by those who have not been able to achieve family reunion under the current program.

QRAR wishes to offer our support for the review of the current Community Sponsorship Program to make it more affordable and accessible for those refugees who seek a pathway to a safe re-union with their beloved families.

*Sue Longmore, OAM - **Queenscliff Rural Australians for Refugees***

³ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/community-support-program/>

⁴ file:///C:/Users/61410/Downloads/Q0120_LegalandConstitutionalAffairs_2018-19Budgetestimates_HomeAffairs.pdf

Harnessing social capital to support integration outcomes for refugees

Social capital uses the strengths of different communities to bond society with shared values and goals; build bridges between groups of different backgrounds and cultures; and to link these groups by sharing influence and power to better the community and grow together. These three aspects of social capital – bonding, bridging, and linking, build trust and improve social cohesion within a community. While some can use the concept of social cohesion to call for a homogenous and closed society, CRAG and the other organisations contributing to this submission see social cohesion as a force to make Geelong, the Bellarine Peninsula and the Surf Coast more open, welcoming, diverse, and therefore rich and vital, communities.

Geelong, Bellarine and the Surf Coast have strong existing networks and community organisations which will combine resources and skills to support and welcome refugees. (Examples of this are the scholarships offered by local schools, and the scholarships and careers clinics provided by Deakin University, for people of refugee background.) These networks are ready to be called upon in an improved sponsorship program to ensure that sponsorship will be effective and successful.

Uniting Barwon has both a past and current record of providing support to a wide range of refugees and newcomers in our community, and would in the future be happy to support refugees through the Community Sponsorship Program for Refugees. Uniting would be able to provide support in the form of food, clothing, household goods and furniture, white goods, budgeting assistance, paying of power and other utility bills, assistance with educational expenses for children, rental assistance and no-interest loans for goods and services while people are establishing themselves in their new community.

Uniting Barwon, and by extension the Geelong and Barwon Community, and refugees and newcomers have mutually beneficial relationships where refugees and newcomers volunteer with Uniting. The refugees and newcomers are enthusiastic, dedicated and motivated. Uniting community service program team members happily provide them the opportunity to fine tune existing skills, and learn new skills, that help them gain employment and become valuable members of our community

*Des Younghusband – Senior Manager Barwon, **Uniting***

Geelong Refugee Assistance Program (G-RAP) is fully supportive of community sponsorship as a resettlement pathway for refugees. We are keen to see and support more refugees given the chance to flee persecution and find a new and secure home in our communities.

G-RAP provides both material and emotional support for refugees arriving in Geelong. The Material Aid Program distributes household goods and clothing monthly, free to all refugees. The Gathering Place provides a weekly social gathering for refugee women to find friendship, support, advocacy, advice, health information and support with learning English and application for citizenship.

This kind of sponsorship program would increase the opportunities for the people of G-RAP and the wider Geelong community to get to know and assist our newest neighbours to feel at home and settle into their new lives in Australia.”

*Hilary Hoevenaars – **Coordinator, Geelong Refugee Assistance Program***

The Wesley Asylum Seeker Welcome Place is drop-in centre in the heart of Geelong, where people seeking asylum and people who have temporary refugee visas:

- Are treated with dignity and respect*
- Are provided with hospitality, including a shared evening meal once a week*
- Can gather for activities such as art, games, English conversation, music, gardening, cooking and occasional excursions*
- Have the opportunity to enjoy friendship and laughter*
- Are able to freely ask questions*
- Receive information and support*
- Receive assistance jobs-seeking, letter-reading and form-filling*
- May access food support if needed*
- Can be referred to relevant services (English classes, legal services, other material relief services, counselling services etc.)*

If Geelong community members and local organisations were able to sponsor refugees for resettlement through a program similar to the Canadian model, the Welcome Place would be very happy to extend its services to support refugees arriving through the Community Sponsorship Program.

An affordable community sponsorship program would be an excellent way for families, who have been separated due to war and persecution, to be reunited in the welcoming and supportive city of Geelong.

We know, from the ways we have seen refugees and people seeking asylum contribute their skills and energy and connect so well with our local community, that our new neighbours arriving through community sponsorship will add to the richness of our social tapestry here in Geelong.

*Catherine Bond – Volunteer Team Leader, **Wesley Asylum Seeker Welcome Place***

Aireys Inlet Rural Australians for Refugees initiated a campaign titled “Free a Refugee” with the goal of raising \$18,500 to support the transfer of a refugee to Canada under their sponsorship program. Such was the level of support for this project in our community that this sum was raised in the first three weeks of the campaign, followed by raising a further \$5,000. This is evidence of the faith in our community that community sponsorship programs provide a viable pathway to a new life for people seeking asylum. It also demonstrates the willingness of our community to financially support such endeavours.

AIRAR also has a strong track record of supporting refugees living in our community on temporary visas. This has included hosting groups for picnic days at the beach, surfing lessons and overnight camps, providing refugees with opportunities to learn about safe ocean swimming, experience bushwalking for the first time and to generally appreciate and enjoy our coastal environment. There is no doubt that this hospitality would be extended to refugees coming into our region under the Community Sponsorship Program.

*Mary Bremner – Convenor, **Aireys Inlet Rural Australians for Refugees***

St Joseph's College Geelong strongly supports the need to modify the existing Community Sponsorship Program for refugees. As a Catholic College in the Edmund Rice tradition, our values of compassion, innovation and integrity align with the need to support the Geelong community to engage in refugee sponsorship as a more compassionate resettlement pathway.

There are various examples of support systems currently in place to develop networks and relationships between refugees and our community to support successful integration outcomes for refugees, mutually benefitting all. Some initiatives currently in place include:

- St Joseph's has a staff member role appointed as Refugee Coordinator in the college. The Refugee Coordinator is the key contact person for all refugee students attending St Joseph's College. They ensure the students are receiving the appropriate educational and pastoral support and assist in the inclusion of refugee priorities in the curriculum.
- We host a welcome dinner (pre-covid19) for our refugee families early in the school year and a follow up afternoon tea where the students invite one of their classmate's family to join in and meet each other's family, building connections and friendships.
- We have supported the 'The Welcome Place' * with a culturally appropriate food drive for their food bank.
- We celebrate the theme for Refugee Week each year and host welcoming cultural celebrations, awareness raising of current issues, including refugee and asylum seeker perspectives in the curriculum and advocacy actions such as creating Circle of Solidarity event in past years across the combined Catholic Colleges (pre-covid19).

All of our initiatives are empowered by our four Touchstones of Inclusive Community, Justice and Solidarity, Gospel Spirituality and Liberating Education.

The community of St Joseph's College advocates for the more compassionate, inclusive and liberating process of **Refugee Sponsorship**, as a resettlement pathway for those we wish to welcome into our community. By doing so, enabling a more inclusive way to share the gifts, talents and the cultural richness that bring diversity in each other's art, recreation, music, belief systems, food, stories and ways of interacting with the environment sustainably.

Geelong has long been a place of welcome with appropriate support and services available and many community groups, families and businesses willing to reach out and act as refugee sponsors.

Mary Malone - Acting Director of Identity, **St Joseph's College Geelong**

*<https://www.facebook.com/The-Welcome-Place-104432599899570/>

Additionality is crucial

The UNHCR has reported that there were 20.4 million refugees of concern globally at the end of 2019, but that less than one per cent of refugees are resettled each year. Only a small number of nations take part in the UNHCR's resettlement program, with Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia and the Nordic countries providing substantial intakes each year.⁵

Australia's current refugee intake capped under current policy at around 18,000 people per year; just 0.009% of the need identified by the UNHCR at the end of 2019. It is therefore imperative that a revised CSP makes additional resettlement places available, rather than including community-sponsored places within the government's quota.

It is important for our nation to act as a positive global citizen and for the Australian Government to demonstrate leadership by continuing to provide a generous government-funded resettlement program. Local communities will be much more likely to be energised to engage with a sponsorship program if the program provides additional opportunities for people to rebuild their lives in safety.

Australia is a safe, stable and well-resourced nation. Our annual refugee intake should reflect this. However, when combining the numbers of people given protection through asylum processes with those provided with resettlement through the UNHCR, Australia's global ranking in refugee resettlement in 2018 was 14th overall, 20th per capita and 60th relative to national GDP.⁶

The Community Sponsorship program provides an excellent opportunity to tap into local community resources to increase the number of places available for refugee resettlement. Combined Refugee Action Group would not support any expansion of the Community Sponsorship program that does not provide sponsorship places that are in addition to existing resettlement quotas.

Peter Coghlan – Co-convenor, **Combined Refugee Action Group**

St Bernard's Parish has provided significant and long-standing assistance to asylum seekers and refugees through:

- *Personal and long-term support to individuals*
- *Assistance through our St Vincent de Paul Conference*
- *Material and financial support*
- *Advocacy and awareness-raising activities*

Our Justice Group agrees with the Geelong Combined Refugee Action Group, and the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce, that the current Sponsorship Program can be improved to better assist local refugee families to reunite with families and friends and to provide local groups and volunteers with a clearer plan of support.

⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/resettlement.html>

⁶ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/2018-global-trends/>

Therefore, we encourage the Government to modify the existing Program provided it:

- does not take places from others in need of resettlement places
- provides appropriate support and services
- is affordable and sustainable
- allows community, family, and businesses to act as sponsors
- creates more places for people in need of protection to integrate and settle in Australia.

*Len Monk – Coordinator – **St Bernard's Parish Justice Group***

There would be enormous local enthusiasm and action to welcome and support additional refugees into our community through an expanded Community Sponsorship Program. However, it would be very difficult to garner support if people perceived that the government was abdicating its responsibility by passing work and expenses, for the existing humanitarian entrant quota, on to local communities.

*Sue Longmore, OAM - **Queenscliff Rural Australians for Refugees***

Increasing regional settlement through sponsorship

According to the Regional Australia Institute, regional areas in Australia benefit greatly from international migration, including refugees. New migrants assist in 'boosting population numbers and filling labour shortages'; they keep schools open, bolster infrastructure, support local clubs, and build strong connections to the land⁷. However, for regional settlement to succeed and even thrive, the Institute asserts that community backing and involvement is essential. Community sponsorship is one way to achieve this. Sponsorship allows communities to invite families and individuals into the region, which supports them to build bonds and networks within those area, strengthening links, commitment, and contribution to the area. The Regional Australia Institute goes on to say that this encourages these families and individuals to encourage other migrant workers to that area, further building and strengthening rural and regional centres.

One of the key challenges for humanitarian entrants is that resources and employment are more established for refugees in cities, where there are more services directed to their needs, established settlements of their diaspora, and speakers of their languages. Community sponsorship asks communities involved to specifically address these issues in their plan to support new migrants. As networks and resources become established, it becomes easier and more welcoming for migrants to settle in these areas. As communities grow, organisations are able to move into those areas to provide services specifically targeting those communities. A good example is organisations such as Australian Red Cross opening up offices in Shepparton and Dandenong to support growing asylum seeker populations in those areas.⁸

There are already a number of toolkits and resources dedicated to supporting regional

⁷ http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/MigrationToolkit_v6.pdf

⁸ The author has worked for Australian Red Cross in both of these projects and was responsible for opening the Red Cross office in Shepparton.

settlement that can be accessed to strengthen this program, including the *Steps to Settlement Success: A Toolkit for Rural and Regional Communities*; and resources from Welcoming Cities. There is widespread support and strong evidence for the benefit of rural and regional settlement for both existing communities and new arrivals. Community sponsorship is an innovative and empowering way to contribute to this.

Torquay Community House looks forward to the day that we can welcome and support community-sponsored refugees in their daily effort to create a wholistic resettlement pathway to enjoy and to be part of community life in Torquay.

For many years now the Surf Coast Shire has been a welcome Refugee Zone and we are proud of that sign on our highway as it represents a sign of welcome. The diversity and social capital that refugees bring to regional townships, like any community in which they live and have the opportunity to work, would be of great benefit to our area.

We have English as a Second Language tutors who would welcome the opportunity to include refugees in classes, encouraging them to develop their English skills and supporting them with any administrative chores.

Whatever needs arise, we would step up to aid refugees involved in a resettlement pathway on their journey to new lives without fear of persecution.

*Laura Connor - Co-ordinator, **Torquay Community House***

Conclusion

The wider Geelong region, incorporating the City of Greater Geelong, the Bellarine Peninsula and the Surf Coast, has a strong history of welcoming refugees and supporting them to rebuild their lives as our new neighbours.

Our vibrant communities contain many people and organisations who have the skills, experience and willingness to engage with a Community Sponsorship Program which is financially accessible; allows the community to act as sponsors; provides resettlement places in addition to our national humanitarian quota; and allows for family reunions. Further, we believe that including a focus on refugees who are in limbo, living temporarily in transit countries within our region, would provide them with a safe, timely and orderly pathway to resettlement.