



**St Vincent de Paul Society**  
NATIONAL COUNCIL  
*good works*

ABN: 50 748 098 845

National Council of Australia Inc  
22 Thesiger Court  
Deakin ACT 2600  
PO Box 243  
Deakin West ACT 2600  
Telephone: (02) 6202 1200  
Facsimile: (02) 6285 0159  
Website: [www.vinnies.org.au](http://www.vinnies.org.au)  
Donation Hotline: 13 18 12

Refugee Council of Australia

Via email: [admin@refugeecouncil.org.au](mailto:admin@refugeecouncil.org.au)

# Input to Annual Intake Submission and Consultations

---

## Contents

1. What strategies could the Australian Government adopt to respond to key refugee protection issues and new and existing humanitarian crises? What role could the Refugee and Humanitarian Program play in this response?.....	3
2. Which groups would you nominate as being in priority need of resettlement under Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program during 2014-15? .....	3
3. Recognising that the 2013-14 Humanitarian Program will return to its previous size (13,750 visas), what comments or reflections do you have about how the expansion to 20,000 Humanitarian visa places went in the previous program year? What are the implications of this expansion that still need to be considered or addressed? .....	3
4. What comments, concerns or issues would you like to raise about the implementation of any of the recommendations of the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers?.....	4
5. What questions, comments or concerns do you have about the new Community Proposal Pilot?.....	4
6. What questions, comments or concerns would you like to raise regarding the Regional Resettlement Arrangements with PNG? .....	5
7. What would you like the new Coalition government to consider about the policies that they have articulated or have already implemented? .....	5
8. What issues or concerns have not been addressed in the Coalition government's agenda and should be considered? .....	6
9. Are there any other new and emerging issues or concerns that you think RCOA should be advocating on? .....	7

The St Vincent de Paul Society (the Society) is a respected lay Catholic charitable organisation, working in 149 countries around the world. In Australia, we operate in every state and territory, with more than 50,000 members, volunteers, and employees. Our people are deeply committed to our work of social assistance and social justice, and we run a wide variety of programs around the country. Our work seeks to provide help for those who are marginalised by structures of exclusion and injustice, and our programs target (among other groups) people who are homeless and insecurely housed, migrants and refugees, people living with mental illness, and people experiencing poverty.

The Refugee Council of Australia has invited input on its annual consultations on the future of Australia's refugee and humanitarian program. Many Society members have attended the Council's various face-to-face consultations around Australia. We also welcome the opportunity to contribute this written submission on the questions raised in the Council's discussion paper.

**1. What strategies could the Australian Government adopt to respond to key refugee protection issues and new and existing humanitarian crises? What role could the Refugee and Humanitarian Program play in this response?**

We believe that Australian government strategies and policy need to be grounded in our international legal duties, and our moral obligations to other human beings. We must support the adoption and maintenance of any international treaties that offer safety to people fleeing in genuine fear of danger, irrespective of their mode and place of arrival. We must support continuing adherence to and full compliance with the United Nations Convention on Refugees and its protocols for persons fleeing from persecution, and we must resist measures that seek to sidestep our obligations under the Convention. Australia should also support any international or national instrument that offers protection for persons fleeing to safety for non-Convention reasons (complementary protection) or environmental catastrophes (environmentally displaced refugees).

As such, the Refugee and Humanitarian Program should be one plank in Australia's refugee policy, which is in turn a small part of many broader national and international policies.

**2. Which groups would you nominate as being in priority need of resettlement under Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program during 2014-15?**

No comment.

**3. Recognising that the 2013-14 Humanitarian Program will return to its previous size (13,750 visas), what comments or reflections do you have about how the expansion to 20,000 Humanitarian visa places went in the previous program year? What are the implications of this expansion that still need to be considered or addressed?**

The Society was strongly and publically supportive of the increase to 20,000 places. Australia is a remarkably wealthy country, economically and in spirit. We are ready and able to welcome many thousands more refugees into our communities. Particularly in regional communities, although all across Australia, we generally see incredibly positive feeling towards refugees, in school, in work, and in broader society. And, in turn, refugees have deeply enriched the lives of many Society members and the community as a whole: we are deeply and sincerely moved on a daily basis by their humility, thankfulness, resilience, and positive contribution.

The Society is very strongly opposed to this one third reduction of the Humanitarian program. This represents more than 6,000 people per year who will be forced to remain in situations of extreme danger, poverty, and misery, with high risk of illness and death.

Already, on the global scale, resettlement of recognised refugees is extremely low; our understanding is that, in 2012, less than one per cent of refugees were re-settled worldwide. As a wealthy country that prides itself on being a caring and compassionate nation, it is concerning to see that we have reduced our recently expanded resettlement numbers, rather than honouring them.

The Society's observation, via home visits, volunteer programs and other refugee-focused programs, is of the immense spirit of kindness and compassion with which refugees and the Australian community have greeted each other, and how we have all grown, as individuals, and as a society, in the process of welcoming those who needed help. Our experience as a grassroots charity is that those who are from a refugee or asylum seeker background are hardworking, respectful, and determined to provide for themselves and their community. It is a great shame to see the reduction of resettlement numbers at a time when the global need has increased. We encourage the government to honour the expansion of resettlement numbers and thus honour our duty to preserve human dignity by supporting those in need, and to do so with compassion.

#### **4. What comments, concerns or issues would you like to raise about the implementation of any of the recommendations of the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers?**

The actual content and meaning of the Expert Panel aside, the translation by government into a policy of "No Advantage", and intentionally keeping people in detention for as long as possible to punish them, is highly concerning.

Keeping any asylum seeker in detention for more than the absolute minimum time necessary to process them, including security and medical checks, violates their dignity as a human being. It punishes them when they have done nothing wrong, and it intentionally inflicts suffering on them – already some of the world's most vulnerable people – in an attempt to deter other highly vulnerable people from asking us for help. It is a cold-hearted, rather than compassionate, response. It is a violation of human rights and human dignity. Babies, children, and teenagers are being detained in awful conditions, along with many people who are sick, elderly, or otherwise have heightened vulnerability. All this is happening in Australia's name, as a direct result of our government's policies.

We would urge an immediate and public rejection of the "No Advantage" policy, and instead increased investment in speedy and effective processing. All people have equal dignity, and are entitled to equal respect, even when they are far from home, speak another language, and have different coloured skin.

#### **5. What questions, comments or concerns do you have about the new Community Proposal Pilot?**

The Community Sponsorship Pilot Program should fulfil its original purpose: as a means for the government to *increase* its refugee intake (i.e. over and above the Humanitarian Program maximum) in a revenue-neutral manner.

The Society has consistently expressed concern to government, across a variety of forums, about the current deployment of the program, in which the numbers are *subtracted* from the Humanitarian Program allowance. We believe this distorts the Humanitarian Program's purpose and aims. The Society believes the Community Sponsorship Pilot Programs must return to being an addition over and above the Humanitarian Program numbers, instead of being a means of government abrogating responsibility to refugees it has pledged to protect.

## **6. What questions, comments or concerns would you like to raise regarding the Regional Resettlement Arrangements with PNG?**

The Society acknowledges the global phenomenon of forced migration. Ending persecution in asylum seekers' home countries is a matter of international concern that does require regional and global cooperation.

More immediately, managing the flow of asylum seekers in the Asia-Pacific is a challenge that cannot be met by Australia simply "turning back the boats", or by pushing asylum seekers towards our neighbours. Returning vulnerable asylum seekers to Indonesia or Malaysia, to Sri Lanka, or to detention or resettlement in Papua New Guinea or Nauru, is unethical, and in clear breach of Australia's international legal obligations. The Society believes Australia should not cooperate in any scheme that subjects those asylum seekers to the risks of refoulement or other violations of their human rights, nor should it cooperate in a manner that is not mutually advantageous to the nations concerned.

Regional measures could instead include increasing support for the UNHCR as it manages the hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers in our neighbouring countries, establishing Australian assessment centres offshore (so that people don't have to risk their lives coming here to be assessed), direct support for those countries as they cope with large numbers of asylum seekers needing support, and funding for overseas advocacy, to encourage other countries to meet their legal obligations to asylum seekers.

Additionally, (and the move that is most consistently supported by refugees themselves) government should provide significantly more assistance to the regions that most people are fleeing from. No-one wants to flee their homeland, and assisting with the creation of stable and safe political and economic systems overseas by way of foreign aid, in countries like Afghanistan and Sri Lanka for example, will enable people to remain in their homes in the first place.

## **7. What would you like the new Coalition government to consider about the policies that they have articulated or have already implemented?**

We are incredibly concerned at the lack of information coming from the government regarding refugees and asylum seekers, currently comprising a once-a-week press briefing where very little real information is given. We are deeply troubled by this apparent "out of sight, out of mind" approach. Asylum seekers are people, and a core part of the St Vincent de Paul mission is the belief that all people should be given a voice, and should be given

equal recognition and dignity. This cannot happen when the government withholds all information about them.

We are also saddened and appalled by the policy of calling asylum seekers “illegal”. The fact that this is simply incorrect is beyond dispute. “Illegal” means that they have broken a law, and there is simply no law that asylum seekers break by leaving the country that is torturing them, killing their families, and forcing them out, and coming elsewhere for another chance at life. Any such law would, in any case, be totally contrary to Australia’s international legal and human rights obligations, and grossly immoral. It is not illegal to ask for help, particularly when your life is at stake.

The Society advocates that all asylum seekers living in the community on bridging visas are awarded permission to work for the duration of their resolution of immigration status. Denying or revoking work rights denies a person’s ability to support themselves and their family. The negative impact on the health, safety and wellbeing (both physical and emotional) has been evidenced by a number of research papers, and observed by members of the St Vincent de Paul Society. There is growing concern that without the ability to earn a living, people are vulnerable to exploitation, corruption and criminal activities. By providing work rights, people have the opportunity to contribute to society in a meaningful way, which includes financial contributions via tax payment and as an active consumer within the community. Without income, people become increasingly dependent on charities, which is not sustainable for the clients or organisations.

The Society supports the abolition of the recently introduced Temporary Protection Visas and requests that asylum seekers, whether they arrive by boat or plane, are awarded a protection visa with full residency status if determined to be a refugee. We are concerned about the implications and effects of temporary status for refugees, both on their mental health and on their ability to settle within broader society while still living in an enforced state of residential limbo.

## **8. What issues or concerns have not been addressed in the Coalition government’s agenda and should be considered?**

The Society would like to remind the Coalition government that the people seeking asylum are vulnerable and have taken extreme measures to reach safety due to the dangers in their home countries. We note that the ‘push’ factors (that is, the issues that are current in the countries of origin) do not seem to be considered, acknowledged or addressed within the current Immigration and Border Protection policy. We encourage the government to actively address and consider the global situation and take the ‘push factors’ in to consideration.

We question the current policy to deport and transfer asylum seekers and, in particular, pregnant women and children, to Nauru and Manus Island, where there is inadequate health care and evidenced threat of serious disease. We remind the government that Australia is a signatory to both the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Convention on The Rights of the Child. We request that the Coalition honour these laws and adjust its policies and agenda to reflect these commitments accordingly.

We encourage a change in discussion in regards to asylum seekers, and would like to see the government developing a more humane approach to working with our newest arrivals. We

would encourage the costings of the current systems be actively considered by the government, with acknowledgment that a more humane approach – that capacitates and enables asylum seekers, rather than seeking to hurt them – will also be more economically viable for Australia.

## **9. Are there any other new and emerging issues or concerns that you think RCOA should be advocating on?**

The Society is currently aware of large numbers of Vietnamese asylum seekers fleeing religious persecution in Vietnam, and coming to Australia. This issue does not seem to have gained much media attention, and it is unclear to us how these people are being processed by our government. Some indications we receive are that they are not receiving due process. We believe more research and advocacy could occur for these people.

-----

The Society thanks the Refugee Council of Australia for conducting these community consultations. We share the commitment to refugees and asylum seekers, as particularly vulnerable members of our global society, and we appreciate the chance to participate in this conversation.

Australia does much good for refugees, and the St Vincent de Paul Society is proud to partner with many NGOs and government organisations in this space. The Society has been very concerned about asylum seekers in Australia for some decades. The last few years have seen some increasingly cruel policies against people who come to Australia seeking help, many of which cause very real and documented suffering to human beings who have done absolutely nothing wrong. We see people living in Australia in abject poverty, who are not allowed to get jobs. We see people in detention centres, with increasingly severe mental illness. And we read stories about people who come here to our doorstep desperate for help, who we send back to the place they were fleeing, and who are subsequently tortured or killed by their own governments.

We will continue to advocate on principles of truth, compassion, dignity, and justice. We will continue to listen to the stories of refugees, and tell those stories. Through every means possible, we will continue to fight for a better future for refugees.