



Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group Inc

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Submission to: Prime Minister and Cabinet review into integration, employment, and settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants

**From: Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group (BMRSG)
Gazetted on 14 December 2018**

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity of contributing to the Prime Minister and Cabinet review into integration, employment, and settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants Gazetted on 14 December 2018.

Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group (BMRSG) is a member of Rural Australians for Refugees. We currently provide support and friendship to approximately 70 households, which include refugees and humanitarian entrants and people seeking asylum, through our community visitors. Our Villawood Detention Centre visitors regularly visit people in detention and endeavour to stay in contact with people when they are released or moved to other facilities. These households and persons live in the Blue Mountains NSW, Lithgow, Western Sydney and one family in South Australia with whom we have a long-term relationship. We are an entirely voluntary organization with no paid staff and are not aligned with any political party or religious organization. We have around 400 paid up members and around 3,000 social media supporters.

Our experience has been that the three greatest barriers to integration, employment and positive settlement outcomes are:

- 1 The current visa system, which causes constant stress and uncertainty over a very long time.
- 2 The fact that asylum seekers and refugees do not have the same rights as other residents in Australia in legal matters. They are not presumed innocent until proven guilty and may be put in detention for long periods over minor matters and even if found innocent may not be released.
- 3 Refugees and people seeking asylum do not have need-based access to support, education and assistance that other Australians enjoy. This impedes their progress towards integration, employment and positive settlement outcomes.

To provide the best integration, employment, and settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants our experience suggests that Australia should:

- 1 Reintroduce Permanent Protection Visas for all proven refugees with the same pathways to citizenship, rights to family reunion, and access to services for all, regardless of mode of arrival.
- 2 Provide the same legal rights to refugees and asylum seekers as all other residents of Australia, namely the presumption of innocence unless proven guilty, and no incarceration unless the person is a danger to themselves or others, or is a flight risk.
- 3 Provide appropriate, need based support, free basic education, torture and trauma counselling and access to HECS for all refugees and people seeking asylum. People need work rights and assistance into employment plus financial support if they are to integrate quickly and contribute to the economy and society.

We have expanded on these issues under the terms of reference below:

- 1 The review should undertake research allowing for the recommendation of policy options for improving the integration, employment and settlement outcomes of refugees and humanitarian entrants**

Visa issues

BMRS has come across quite a few situations where the onerous repetitive nature of re-applying for temporary protection visas has compromised people's employment. Employers are reluctant to employ someone who has, at the most, a 6-month visa, for any long-term employment. This means that refugees and asylum seekers are stuck in casual low paying jobs, which hardly pay their rent or food for their family. In addition they often need to take time off work to attend interviews and get extra legal help and so in several cases we have come across, lose their employment. Sometimes bridging visas are delayed, also jeopardizing employment.

Case study

One family we support have 4 children. The two older children are attending a local high school and doing exceptionally well, the youngest is a toddler and the mother's English is poor. The father had a regular casual job which paid the rent and they managed to live with some help, however his application for the renewal of his visa became complicated, he had to take several days off work and lost his job. The family ended up having to give up their flat and move in with relatives as the only work he could obtain would not cover the rent. Now two families are living in a 3 bedroom flat, 10 in all.

Those refugees and people seeking asylum who use their initiative and set up a business do not have their initiative rewarded by the granting of a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa. Below is a case study of one such family.

The family includes a husband his wife and three children two of whom were born in Australia. Our organisation has been involved as friends and supporters with this family since 2013. The effects of torture and trauma experienced by the husband gradually lessened as he had access to counselling, built up a garden in the accommodation provided and fed his family and others. Our visitors have been impressed with their care for others in the wider community. For example they often even gave home cooked meals to the lollipop lady and gentleman at their daughter's school and were encouraging and supportive to other refugee families in their circle.

Their independent work ethic and the loving way they treat their children are particularly impressive. Their parents have cherished the girls and every opportunity to help them learn and embrace the Australian way of life has been taken.

At their own expense they relocated to South Australia to establish a thriving vegetable growing business in a SHEV postcode after applying for a SHEV visa. Their eldest child has just won a state-wide education award.

The refusal of their application and their appeal did not take into account their contribution to their own financial independence, or the reports from the United Nations in July 2018 which indicate the lack of progress in Sri Lanka towards addressing issues of torture and the targeting of members of the Tamil population.

2 The review should investigate employment outcomes in refugee and humanitarian cohorts, and the ways in which positive outcomes benefit individuals, communities and strengthen the economy.

See above

When visiting at Villawood Detention Centre NSW our voluntary visitors come across people who have successfully integrated into Australian society, got stable employment, even married and set up a family and then been caught by accusations which when tested in court, were found to be erroneous. These innocent people are still in detention and taxpayers are now supporting their families. The fear that situations like this arouse in other refugees impedes their integration into Australian society. Many refugees have come from places where the legal system has been used to terrorise marginalized groups. The message that inequality before the law sends is that “you are still not safe - the authorities are not to be trusted”.

The lack of equality before the law means that unscrupulous people can manipulate refugees. Accusing a refugee of a crime means that they may be picked up and taken into detention for who knows how long.

We have met people who were involved in car accidents, which were not their fault, found innocent but are still in detention. Another refugee was caught sharing a smoke of marijuana with friends from his work place at a local pub. Police let everyone off with a warning but the refugee was picked up by immigration/border force and is still in detention. This lack of equality before the law is undermining our legal system.

3 The review should seek out best practice case studies of how Australians can work together to encourage integration of refugees and humanitarian entrants in the wider community, including identifying significant barriers to success.

See case study under 1

English language and education

Some of the adults we are involved with are illiterate in their own language as well as having very limited English. Many have spent protracted time in refugee camps and missed out on basic education. They need easy, sensitive, culturally appropriate access to English language, literacy and basic education through organizations such as NSW TAFE, which already has branches in regional areas. Faith groups, voluntary organisations and individuals are currently providing some classes and individual tutoring, which have beneficial outcomes. Everyone would benefit from TAFE Outreach courses in community settings and the provision of trained educators.

Case study

One of our members met a young woman, a humanitarian refugee who had been in a refugee camp all her life, in the shops in our semirural town. The young woman was struggling with the language and settling into the Australian way of life but had had some education. As a retired teacher our member was able to assist her with English and friendship and help her with a course as an enrolled nurse. She is now employed in one of our local facilities that was desperately short of staff.

Refugees and Asylum seekers need to be exempt from HECS debt for all basic educational levels. The NSW government's provision of access for asylum seekers and refugees to vocational courses up to certificate 4 has been very helpful to many.

Case study

One refugee who we had been involved with for several years was able to get a licence for operating a forklift after we had assisted him with a no interest loan and is now in regular employment. His pathway to employment would have been faster if he had been released from detention with work rights, as well as support.

Asylum Seekers and Refugees need access to HECS assistance for levels beyond certificate 4 vocational courses. No refugees or asylum seekers have the resources to afford full fees and so many have so much to offer.

- 4 The review should consider the literature on settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants, and identify key areas influencing positive settlement outcomes.**
- 5 The review should consider how integration, employment and settlement outcomes vary by region.**
- 6 The review may have regard to any previous or ongoing reviews, inquiries, recent policy measures undertaken or academic literature that it considers relevant.**
- 7 The review may also invite submissions and seek information from any persons or bodies that it considers relevant.**