

Briefing paper: Improving resettlement policies for refugees and asylum seekers

Introductory Statement

Increasing numbers of social workers work with refugees and asylum seekers in various settings and in a range of roles including direct case work, community work, advocacy, management and policy. Refugees arriving as permanent residents receive support when they arrive and have much greater access to services and financial support than do asylum seekers. Refugees are not subject to the punitive and excluding policies to which asylum seekers (especially those who arrived by boat) are subject. They experience basic safety in Australia.

Asylum seekers, particularly those who arrive by boat, are quite intentionally excluded at every opportunity. Social workers must therefore work directly against the dominant oppressive system that is represented by the government and some government departments. The AASW is also concerned about the slow processing of applications of the additional 12,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees that the Government promised in 2015 to resettle in Australia. Unfortunately, the slow processing of applications generally has become a feature of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection under this Government. Such slow processing contributes to the trauma many asylum seekers and refugees experience and makes the resettlement process more difficult.

The special place of asylum seekers and refugees

Australia, particularly since WWII, has benefitted greatly from migration and the influx of refugees from all round the world. While there are difficulties, Australia has managed a growing multicultural diversity much better than many other countries. Multicultural diversity will continue to increase throughout the 21st century and it is important that Australia plans to include this reality.

Australia has obligations to protect human rights of all asylum seekers and refugees who arrive in Australia according to the human rights conventions to which Australia is a signatory, regardless of how or where they arrive and whether they arrive with or without a visa. Social workers are committed to the wellbeing of asylum seekers and refugees in need. The AASW believes that current government policies at times both infringe basic human rights and interfere with the ability of social workers to offer appropriate professional assistance. In particular there are four areas that need to be urgently addressed.

These are:

- Processing applications by asylum seekers and refugees in a timely manner. Currently, there are inordinate delays in a number of areas, including the processing of applications for the 12,000 places for Syrian and Iraqi refugees, from the 28,000 asylum seekers who have previously arrived by boat and from many refugees who have applied for citizenship.
- Problems for young people on Temporary Protection Visas (TPV) who are qualified but who cannot go on to higher education because they are not entitled to HECS-HELP assistance and they lose their Special Benefit (The TPV alternative to Youth Allowance or Austudy) if they enrol in a course that is longer than 12 months.¹
- Discrimination and bureaucratic delays that are hindering family reunions by asylum seekers who have arrived by boat, including Direction 62 for those on TPVs as well as delays in processing citizenship applications for permanent refugee visa holders.²
- Limited access to the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS) for asylum seekers as well as limitations on the use social workers can make of this service during resettlement.

The Social Work Profession

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 9800 professional social workers throughout Australia.

Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to the profession and are underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge.

¹ RCOA (2015) Barriers to Education for People Seeking Asylum and Refugees on Temporary Visas. Available at <http://goo.gl/c5SpqF>

² RCOA (2015) Delays in Citizenship Applications for Permanent Refugee Visa Holders. Available at <http://goo.gl/JuugvV>