



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

‘Putting the client first: effective settlement with dignity’

Address to the Settlement Council of Australia Conference

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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen.

As Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, I take great pride in the work of my department to resettle the thirteen thousand or more people who we approve to live here each year under the auspices of our humanitarian program.

Over time, they and their children will move through the stages of initial settlement to full citizenship and democratic and community participation—and to contribute to the modern, diverse society Australia has become.

They will join the millions of others of migrants to Australia who have all contributed to building our nation.

The establishment of the Settlement Council of Australia is very welcome in making sure there is an effective dialogue between the many parties involved in resettlement so we can improve the way we work together and respond as the environment in which we work changes.

We need this voice at the national level to bring together a coherent narrative about settlement in Australia today and to address the many complexities and issues that arise in the settlement process.

So I congratulate the council on hosting this conference and look forward to many more opportunities for further dialogue.

I must note with sadness the recent death of Emeritus Professor Jerzy Zubrzycki, who I was honoured to know, and who made a major contribution over many decades in the area of multiculturalism. This was spearheaded in a speech he gave at a citizenship conference in 1968, when he put forward the concept of 'cultural pluralism'. It was the forerunner of multiculturalism and the policies of social inclusion and cultural diversity we espouse today, in which everyone is encouraged to celebrate their cultural associations and ancestry as part of our great democracy.

people our business

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He was a remarkable man, widely respected as the 'father of Australian multiculturalism' and having an enormous influence on the work of my department and successive Australian governments. He himself will be missed but his work will continue to influence all involved in this country in settlement, cultural diversity and citizenship activities.

Putting the client first

Ladies and gentlemen

We must always remember that our work in settlement is about people.

People who possess—in the words of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights—‘...the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family’.

The people we resettle in Australia as refugees may be very vulnerable and may have had traumatic and tremendously difficult experiences previously.

The great gifts we can offer them as a nation are respect for—and recognition of—their human dignity and cultural background, a pathway back to a life of safety, good health and opportunity, an active role in our democracy, and a full and deep sense of belonging.

In the past six decades or so, Australia has resettled around 700 000 humanitarian and refugee arrivals, making this one of the great success stories of our nation as a whole.

It has been, and is, a tremendous partnership between a whole range of government agencies at all three levels of government, as well as contractors, community groups and not least, volunteers.

The driver of the program has been the support of successive Australian governments over many decades for a program size which places us in the top three of governments around the world that resettle refugees.

Even in this time of economic downturn, the size of our program will increase next financial year, to 13 750 people.

At the Australian Government level, we see ourselves as part of a wider team, working towards a successful outcome for the entrant. We work closely with a range of partners including other levels of government and contracted service providers, as well as specialist and mainstream community organisations.

Today, I would like to briefly sketch out these connections and pathways by talking about a typical experience of settlement, drawn from our case files.

What I want to draw out is the way we are able to tailor the settlement experience to each individual client, based on their specific needs.

This young man, whom I shall call Mr Mei, was in his early twenties when he arrived earlier this year.

He was born in Myanmar but had to flee with his family to the Mae La refugee camp when he was seven years old.

This is the largest of nine refugee camps in Thailand sheltering refugees from Myanmar.

Our Minister, Senator Chris Evans and I visited this camp last year.

Despite previous experience working overseas, including on refugee matters, it was humbling to see the enthusiasm of the families I met who had been approved to come to Australia.

I shall not forget the look of hope in their eyes.

Mae La was the only home our young man knew from when he arrived at the age of seven, until he came to Australia in his twenties.

He was lucky to be able to get some schooling in the camp—many refugees in camps around the world do not have access to teachers and so adults can be effectively illiterate in their own language, let alone English, when they arrive here.

The school was also where he met his wife, whom he married five years ago. They had a child a year later.

Mr Mei came to our attention when he was referred to us by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as being a possible candidate for resettlement in Australia.

His application was assessed by DIAC staff in Bangkok in the middle of 2007 and he was interviewed shortly afterwards.

As a suitable candidate, he and his wife and child were subject to the mandatory health and character checks which every permanent arrival to Australia must undergo.

During this time, their second child was born.

Their visa was granted last year, and a referral made that this family might best be placed in the Geelong region of Victoria.

This area has an existing community of Karen people, also exiled from Burma.

This meant there would be people of the same culture who understood the experiences this family had been through and could speak their primary language, and also community services in place who had expertise in offering tailored support.

Once the visa was granted and travel arrangements were confirmed, the family underwent pre-departure medical screening to ensure they would be healthy enough to make the journey to Australia.

They also attended the five-day Australian Cultural Orientation Program covering many things we in this room may take for granted: basic facts about Australia, cultural adjustment, healthcare, education, finding a job, money management, housing and so on.

As this was their first journey in an aeroplane there was also information about what to expect during the life-changing trip to their new home.

Nearly 31 000 people in more than 25 countries have benefited from the AUSCO program since it began in 2003.

This program is tailored to meet the needs of specific groups including pre-literate adults and children. For example, a comic book is to be launched soon as a way of engaging with younger participants in an appealing way.

When the family arrived, they were met at Melbourne airport and transported by car to Corio by the local settlement service provider, who we contract under our Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy or IHSS.

The IHSS is the major program which provides initial, intensive settlement assistance for humanitarian entrants in the first six months after arrival — nearly 10 000 people received assistance last financial year.

This assistance is tailored to the individual's needs and can include case coordination, information and referrals to other service providers and mainstream agencies, as well as meeting entrants on arrival, taking them to accommodation and meeting any emergency needs for medical attention or clothing and footwear.

Our family stayed with a friend in the community for a week or so and then moved into long term accommodation a few bus stops away.

In the meantime, they had been supported to visit the bank, Medicare and Centrelink through assistance from the IHSS provider.

They were also enrolled under the Adult Migrant English Program or AMEP and the Geelong Adult Training and Education facility.

More than 50 000 migrants benefited last financial year from AMEP, with humanitarian entrants eligible for up to 900 hours of tuition depending on their circumstances.

The Mei family received home tuition initially as they had two small children.

A health assessment was provided for the family soon afterwards, to make sure there were no ongoing issues of concern.

Once these initial checks were undertaken and supports established, the family was able to settle into life in their community.

If they wished to, they could take advantage of the projects funded under our Settlement Grants Program such as those in their area run by Diversitat.

The Settlement Grants Program funds service providers to help people to become self-reliant and participate equitably in Australian society as soon as possible after arrival.

A few years ago, we refined the selection criteria for projects and the funding so we can respond quickly to emerging needs. This was partly in recognition that the support requirements for refugee and humanitarian entrants could change rapidly, such as through a change in the source countries for the program.

So Diversitat supports access to information on immigration, housing, health, education, employment, legal issues, schooling, language and social support.

They also offer sporting and volunteer activities and projects with a highly practical focus such as driver education and homework clubs.

Recognising that each client may experience specific difficulties across a broad spectrum of social, parenting, educational, financial or other areas, we also offer Complex Case Support to assist families and individuals to put their lives back on track through development of a specific plan to meet their needs.

There are also other services such as the Translating and Interpreting Service and the Diverse Australia Program under which we fund local community projects to recognise and celebrate our cultural diversity, as well as to build our cohesion and strength as a society.

I hope it is clear that this support respects the fundamental human rights of our clients and is focussed on putting their needs uppermost, by offering tailored assistance at the time when they need it.

The success of this approach is demonstrated by the comments of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres when he visited Australia earlier this year and said publicly that 'Australia has one of the best refugee resettlement programs in the world'.

Arrivals of irregular migrants

The other side of the coin which I wish to discuss briefly today is that of people who arrive here without authorisation, either by sea or by air.

In applying the laws of Australia and policy determined by the government, we aim to uphold their human rights and offer respect as well as providing effective, practical assistance.

I think we can all recognise how dangerous it would be to trust our lives to the unseaworthy vessels offered by people smugglers and their abhorrent practices.

As part of the 2009-10 Federal Budget, a further package of measures was announced to tackle people-smuggling with an emphasis on stopping the boats before they set off.

Today, I would like to discuss some of the issues around unauthorised arrivals and how we support people in this situation.

The issue of using Christmas Island as our major offshore processing centre has been in the news recently, and I would like to put this in perspective.

As of yesterday, we had 508 unauthorised boat arrivals since the start of the year and we had 462 people in immigration detention on Christmas Island.

157 clients had been resettled in Australia since the start of this year and five had returned home voluntarily.

Those still on Christmas Island are having their claims carefully assessed under refugee determination procedures.

This demonstrates that we work very hard to determine as quickly as possible, whether a visa should be granted.

To illustrate this, I will quote Bernadette McGrath, who is the coordinator of torture and trauma services on Christmas Island, provided by the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma.

Bernadette spent three months on Christmas Island earlier this year and said: ‘DIAC staff, from the minister’s office through to the case managers on the ground, are clearly working very hard to provide unauthorised boat arrivals with the most efficient and compassionate service possible in an isolated location such as Christmas Island.

She added that “comments from detainees such as ‘I feel safe and respected for the first time in my life’ are a real testament to the current organisational culture of the department”.

Last year, the minister announced the New Directions in Detention initiative and this has been developed and extended since then and in the recent Budget.

New funding addresses the need for the prompt resolution of people’s immigration status while they remain in the community. This will offer an increased capacity to assist people to reach a timely immigration outcome without the need for detention.

In particular, there will be:

- a new national Community Status Resolution Service
- an assisted voluntary return service to facilitate a client’s departure from the community without the need to detain first
- a package of services including health and welfare support, to facilitate the resolution of the status of vulnerable clients with exceptional circumstances, and
- more flexible work rights arrangements for asylum seekers.

I am very pleased by this as we have developed and piloted this program over a number of years and it accords well with our organisational values of having fair and reasonable dealings with clients, and being an open and accountable organisation.

We have also received the go-ahead to redevelop the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre as Australia's primary onshore immigration detention facility.

This much-needed redevelopment will address concerns previously raised by the Australian Human Rights Commission. When complete, Villawood will be able to accommodate clients in much better conditions and we will be much more able to meet client's individual needs.

Conclusion

The business of my department is to effectively manage each and every stage of the entry and settlement of people in Australia, from applications for residency to the fostering of an inclusive and cohesive society as a whole.

When he opened the conference yesterday, the Parliamentary Secretary, Laurie Ferguson said that: 'we have a strong duty of care to offer effective settlement support to the people we invite to live in this country'.

In supporting those remarks, I note how important it is that we offer people who have experienced so much difficulty, the right to being accorded dignity and respect as they rebuild their lives here.

Thank you.