



Welcoming Refugees and Asylum Seekers

A Parish Kit

Humanity on the move

The practice of granting asylum to people fleeing persecution in foreign lands is one of the earliest hallmarks of civilisation. References to it have been found in texts written 3,500 years ago, during the blossoming of the great early empires in the Middle East such as the Hittites, Babylonians, Assyrians and ancient Egyptians. Over three millennia later, protecting refugees was made the core mandate of the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), which was set up to look after refugees, specifically those waiting to return home at the end of World War II. (www.unhcr.org)

United Nations definition of refugee

The 1951 Refugee Convention spells out that a refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." (www.unhcr.org)

Australia's commitment to helping resettle refugees from Syria and Iraq

On 9 September 2015, the Australian Government announced that a total of 12,000 humanitarian places would be made available for those who have been displaced by conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Priority will be offered to refugees who are deemed most vulnerable — in particular women, children and families, and persecuted minorities who have the least prospect of returning safely to their homes. ([Australian Government - Department of Social Services – An Information Kit](#))

Australia's capacity to assist refugees

The Australian Government has:

- well-established processes, staff and missions overseas to identify and process those in need of resettlement;
- effective processes for referring humanitarian entrants to settlement sites in Australia;
- contractual arrangements with 16 Humanitarian Settlement Service (HSS) providers within 23 contract regions that cater for these clients including any fluctuations;
- well-established settlement sites in all capital cities and 17 regional areas; and
- strong local networks between the settlement sector and other Commonwealth, state, territory and local government programmes and community organisations. ([Australian Government - Department of Social Services An information Kit](#))

Current processes

The Federal Government currently settles people arriving in Australia through the programmes and services under two Commonwealth Departments: the Department of Social Services and the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

Through these departments, particular settlement agencies, under contract with Government, currently provide both direct settlement assistance (housing, advocacy, and counselling) and additional support services (forging community connections, English language support, financial counselling, family and relationship support). Here in Queensland there are two main settlement agencies - MDA (for Brisbane, Rockhampton and Toowoomba regions) and Access Inc. (for Logan City, Ipswich and Gold Coast) with smaller settlement agencies operating north of Rockhampton.

The Federal Government has sent a delegation to the region to work with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to establish a process to identify the 12,000 people to be relocated to Australia, to conduct security and health checks in-country, and issue people with permanent visas. It is understood that priority will be given to families, vulnerable women and children. The question as to whether unaccompanied minors will be included or prioritised is yet to be clarified. Syrians

REFUGEES

Refugees can expect one
of four fates....

....The choice of destiny is
rarely their own.

currently detained on Manus Island and Nauru will not be eligible for resettlement under this program. Syrians now resident in Australia who wish to bring family members to Australia can apply to do so under the usual family reunification process. Australia has an excellent record in the successful resettlement and integration of people in local communities, so Australians have the benefit in working from strong foundations. (*Catholic Social Services Australia (15 September 2015)*)

However, in the South East Corner of Queensland at least, the first response for direct settlement services will be through the Humanitarian Settlement Agencies of MDA and Access Inc. The Catholic Church in the Brisbane Archdiocese will, in this regard, play a more secondary role when it comes to this group of eventual arrivals and is working with these agencies to “fill the gaps” in providing services and resources.

Some issues identified

- Where the 12,000 new arrivals to Australia are to be settled
- How the additional demand for housing will be satisfied
- Whether unaccompanied minors will be included in the intake
- How the Government proposes to ensure that people settled in regional areas (who have no connection to Australia through family or individual/community sponsors) remain in regional areas over the longer term given that past experience tells us that people move to where there are existing ethnic and/or faith communities and family connections
- Whether Government will provide support to agencies to help new arrivals beyond the base needs of food and shelter and provide further funding for the broader services of community development and social cohesion

Realities

It appears certain that it will be some time before these 12,000 people arrive in Australia (though there will be small groups arriving by Christmas this year). Moreover, there has been discussion that full resettlement of all 12,000 new arrivals will extend beyond this financial year and well into the next financial year. Due to the reality of large Syrian and Iraqi populations in Sydney and Melbourne there is no doubt that a majority of new arrivals will be settled or make their way to these capitals due to these Australian connections. It is potentially the case that most regional areas in Australia will not see this cohort of new arrivals and that these new arrivals will be settled in areas closer to capital cities that have the required settlement services and resources.

The support that parishes may be able to provide

Given the realities above, there are still several ways in which parishes can harness the goodwill and generosity of their own parishioners, Catholics or other Christian Churches who wish to welcome refugees, if the opportunity did arise in the future to do so.

- Talk to your local parish priest about approaching local parishioners who have the energy and commitment to start up a group who could welcome newly arrived refugees, temporary safe haven refugee visa holders or asylum seekers in their parish, if they were called to do so.
- Discuss how this group will function as a refugee welcome group, keeping in mind that the key is “preparedness and patience” considering the reality that the parish may or may not meet up with newly arrived permanent or temporary refugee families, or asylum seekers in the near future.
- When coming together, this group might reflect on the Gospel’s teachings of our Christian duty to welcome the stranger (See inserts - Parish reflections on our Christian duty to welcome the refugee and asylum seekers.)
- Identify parish resources such as schooling, free English classes, tutoring, St Vincent de Paul’s etc.
- While housing is the responsibility of settlement agencies and are provided through a recognised external housing provider, identify housing that might be made available to refugees already in Australia who are currently on temporary Safe

ASYLUM SEEKERS

are neither migrant nor refugee. They are a group of persons that live in “limbo”, fleeing their own country but not yet recognized in their country of refuge.

Haven visas or asylum seekers who have had their cases finally determined and are waiting to be returned to their home country (these persons have no ability to access government supported services in this regard).

- Identify opportunities to provide employment and work experience in the parish. The Archdiocese supports MDA's **Work & Welcome 500** program which assists new arrivals in Australia by providing them with a 12 week work placement with a host employer (see enclosed **Work & Welcome 500** pamphlet for further information)
- Raise money to support the provision of additional support services such as specialist trauma counselling for those people who need access to such care
- Provide financial support to such programmes as "Donate a Ride" through MDA.
- Encourage people to register as volunteers to provide English conversation, orient people to local community services, and negotiate public transport
- Convene discussion groups involving leaders of other faiths to help people to understand that Australia is a country that welcomes people of different faiths
- Forge relationships with other Catholic rites in order to better understand the cultural traditions that will be significant for people resettling in Australia
- Host joint liturgical services with community members from other Catholic rites
- Host parish dinners, play groups and BBQs to welcome people into the local community
- Create a welcoming parish environment

"In our time, migration is growing worldwide. Refugees and people fleeing from their homes challenge individuals and communities, and their traditional ways of life; at times they upset the cultural and social horizons which they encounter.

Increasingly, the victims of violence and poverty, leaving their homelands, are exploited by human traffickers during their journey towards the dream of a better future. If they survive the abuses and hardships of the journey, they then have to face latent suspicions and fear. In the end, they frequently encounter a lack of clear and practical policies regulating the acceptance of migrants and providing for short or long term programmes of integration respectful of the rights and duties of all. Today, more than in the past, the Gospel of mercy troubles our consciences, prevents us from taking the suffering of others for granted, and points out way of responding which, grounded in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, find practical expression in works of spiritual and corporal mercy."

