The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the national umbrella body for refugees, asylum seekers and the organisations and individuals who support them, representing over 700 organisational and individual members. RCOA promotes the adoption of flexible, humane and constructive policies by governments and communities in Australia and internationally towards refugees, asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants. RCOA consults regularly with its members and refugee community leaders and this submission is informed by their views.

RCOA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) on the feasibility of a proposed pilot of a private/community refugee sponsorship program. For many years RCOA has been advocating for greater community involvement in resettlement and the expansion of Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program in response to the enormous unmet resettlement needs internationally and Australia’s capacity to do more. As such, RCOA welcomes the Australia’s Government announcement of the feasibility study into a pilot sponsorship program and that such a program “may provide an opportunity to increase the size of the Humanitarian Program” (discussion paper, p.4).

RCOA’s response to the Proposed Pilot of a Private/Community Refugee Sponsorship Discussion Paper has been informed by targeted consultations with 23 volunteer, faith-based, ethno-specific community groups and settlement services around the country as well as the views of refugee communities and service providers documented through RCOA’s annual community consultations over a number of years. RCOA is happy to provide the Department with further details or be involved in further discussions regarding our submission.

1. The feasibility of a private/community refugee sponsorship pilot

RCOA strongly believes that a pilot private/community refugee sponsorship program is both feasible and warranted in the context of the enormous unmet need for more resettlement places worldwide (Q.1). Resettlement is a durable solution for only a limited number of refugees and opportunities for resettlement have been declining since 2009. Of the 10.4 million refugees under the UNHCR mandate at the end of 2011, only 0.7% were resettled in 2011. Total resettlement under UNHCR and non-UNHCR programs in 2011 was 79,784 (29% lower than in 2009). At the same time, UNHCR identified 180,676 refugees in need of resettlement in 2013, and overall global resettlement needs at 859,305. As such, there is a strong case for Australia to do more.

RCOA believes that such a program is also feasible in the context of the considerable goodwill that exists in the Australian community to support refugee resettlement. Representatives from refugee (ethnic) community organisations consulted for this submission and through RCOA’s annual community consultations have overwhelmingly articulated their support for greater community involvement in refugee resettlement. Some ethnic community organisations in Australia who have

shown interest in participating in a pilot program and currently participate in other national sponsorship programs have both the experience and structures internationally and in Australia which would help both in the establishment and smooth implementation of the pilot. They have expressed their willingness to commit human and material resources to implement a pilot in collaboration with DIAC.

RCOA finds that this motivation is shared not only by ethnic community organisations but also by a number of well-established volunteer-based groups, faith-based and community organisations and individuals. Some of the groups which originated through the Community Refugee Settlement Scheme (CRSS), for example, are still operating today and have a long history of involvement in supporting the resettlement of refugees. The wealth of knowledge, resources and commitment of these groups has been underutilised in recent years with the decline in the number of Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) visa grants, particularly for non-Split Family reunion. As such, there are untapped community resources that could be drawn on in developing a viable and cost-effective pilot. This is also apparent in the overwhelming response of the broader Australian community to the recent Community Placement Network initiative of the Australian Homestay Network for people to provide short-term homestay accommodation to asylum seekers released into the community on bridging visas.³

 Depending on the model chosen for the pilot, the feasibility of a private/community sponsorship program may also draw on the family and community links that exist between refugee and humanitarian entrants in Australia and their communities overseas. For example, a pilot that enables greater family reunion would inevitably be more cost-effective than the resettlement of an unlinked refugee given that the person is likely to have access to reduced outlay on arrival (accommodation, daily living expenses, etc). Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, family reunion has been shown to increase the opportunity for good settlement outcomes⁴, bringing a greater dividend to both individuals and the broader Australian community.

Finally, the concept of a pilot builds into the program capacity for review of feasibility. As such, this pilot provides an opportunity for Australia to develop a model that works in the Australian context at both a local and national level, while also drawing on good international examples and evaluations of other successful refugee sponsorship programs.

2. Additional measures for consideration in order to increase Australia’s Humanitarian Program

RCOA believes that there are additional measures that could be taken to effectively increase the capacity of the Humanitarian Program (Q.2) by providing alternative and additional pathways for refugee and humanitarian entrants to propose and reunite with family members under the general Migration Program who would otherwise be eligible under the SHP. While family reunion should be a cornerstone of Refugee and Humanitarian Program, some families may have greater capacity to seek alternative means of reuniting other than the SHP.

As documented in RCOA’s 2011 submission to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship and DIAC⁵ and our 2012 report on family reunion,⁶ there are a number of visa subclasses in the family stream of the Migration Program that could be used, and are being, pursued by refugee and humanitarian entrants. At the same time, there are multiple barriers that effectively exclude many proposers from refugee backgrounds that could be addressed with consideration by DIAC. For example, RCOA has recommended enhancing humanitarian entrants’ access to family reunion through the Migration Program by waiving application fees, enhancing access to affordable and specialised migration advice, lifting bars on access to social security for family reunion visa holders.

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³ http://www.homestaynetwork.org/cpn
who have been proposed by humanitarian entrants and examining alternatives to complex legal and eligibility requirements which cannot be met by people living in refugee situations overseas.

3. Process of selection of potential applicants

In response to the question of how potential applicants should be identified for sponsorship and prioritised for visa processing under the pilot (Q.5) and who should be involved in identifying refugees for sponsorship (Q.6), RCOA considers that there are two potential groups of applicants that would benefit from a private or community sponsorship model, with different considerations needed for the process of selection in each case. These are:

a. Applicants with immediate family members in Australia already identified through the SHP and awaiting a visa grant

With only 714 SHP visas granted in 2011-12, and estimates of around 20,000 applications in the pipeline (a large number of these being split family applications), the expected timeframe for even immediate family reunion through the SHP is now many years. This pilot private/community sponsorship program could potentially meet some of the enormous need for humanitarian family reunion, with applicants drawn from the existing pool of SHP applications. The process for selection, therefore, would already be partly established through the existing SHP application process, with sponsor groups selected able to nominate individual cases where they have links with the primary proposer for sponsorship. With the considerable backlog in SHP cases awaiting a visa grant, it has been suggested that, at least for a pilot, sponsor groups should nominate cases where applications have already been submitted to DIAC for processing rather than submitting new SHP applications, therefore prioritising families who have been separated for more protracted periods of time. Such a model could draw on some of the ideas that remain relevant and were under consideration in 2007 under the planned Proposer Support Program.

It should be noted that in RCOA’s consultations, concerns were raised about how to ensure equity and transparency in the selection of applicants, particularly in the case of sponsor groups being ethnic community organisations and where the community represented has considerable unmet family reunion needs. RCOA considers that sponsor groups should be required to account for how the sponsor group’s decisions are made about the applicants they wish to propose, and to articulate a process for how the community has prioritised cases for sponsorship that takes into consideration equity and an assessment of need.

b. Applicants with community links in Australia who have limited or no access to alternative resettlement processes

The second group of potential applicants that RCOA considers would benefit from access to a private/community sponsorship program are people who have limited access to UNHCR processes and resettlement but who face considerable human rights violations both in countries of asylum or who remain in their country of origin. Again, these cases have in the past been resettled through the SHP but have had even more limited opportunity within the current SHP limitations. Examples of communities from which these applicants could be drawn include those who are situated where UNHCR processing is not available and communities that are facing human rights violations but remain within their country of origin.

There are examples of ethnic communities in Australia which have previously been successful in settling community members through the SHP and which have already established processes for identifying applicants overseas and supporting the resettlement of community members - for example, the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan, Bantal Pulaar community in West Africa and Tibetan community in Nepal. In the cases of both the Ahmadiyya and

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1 UNHCR (May 2012). UNHCR Eligibility guidelines for assessing the international protection needs of members of religious minorities from Pakistan - refer to sections on the Ahmadi, www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4fb0ec662.html
2 The Bantal Pulaar are an ethnic community group dispersed throughout Africa speaking the Fula language. See, for example, www.modernghana.com/news/354511/1/media-ignorance-the-story-of-ghanaian-fulani.html
Tibetan communities, international networks are already established that have been involved in identifying and referring people for resettlement to other states (e.g. Canada and US), and could be involved in the selection of applicants with checking by DIAC as per the SHP process.

In the process of selecting applicants under a sponsorship model, there was a view expressed by a number of consultation participants that people with highly complex needs should not be resettled through a sponsorship model.

4. Sponsor selection and responsibilities

In response to the question of who should be able to sponsor refugees under a pilot (Q.3), RCOA considers that there are a number of potential sponsor groups and that DIAC could call for an Expression of Interest (EOI) from groups interested in participating in a pilot. Potential sponsor groups could include:

- Volunteer-based community organisations with a proven record in supporting refugee and humanitarian entrants to settle in Australia – for example, the Sanctuary groups;
- Ethnic community organisations – organisations established by former refugees and with connections to refugee communities in Australia and overseas; and
- Humanitarian and faith-based community organisations – these organisations may not have been set up for the purposes of supporting refugees but have a social justice outlook, are involved in the delivery of social services and have a resource base which would make them well suited to fulfilling the role of a sponsor group.

RCOA considers that the selection of sponsor groups for a pilot should be undertaken by a panel that includes representatives from DIAC, refugee organisations and settlement services as niche experts in the area of refugee resettlement. The process of selection should include a formal agreement between DIAC and the sponsoring group. As such, it has been suggested that sponsor groups should be incorporated entities.

In assessing the capacity of sponsors (Q.4), RCOA suggests that a clearly articulated set of requirements be incorporated in the EOI to ensure minimum standards for sponsoring groups. Demonstrated requirements of a sponsor group could include:

- **Governance structures:** sponsor groups should be incorporated entities and have clear governance structures.
- **Resource base:** sponsor groups should be able to demonstrate they have the financial and other resources (e.g. fundraising capacity) necessary to provide an adequate level of support for the number of refugees they are proposing to sponsor.
- **Expertise:** sponsor groups should be able to demonstrate an understanding of refugee issues and settlement challenges, cross-cultural competency and have a proven track record of providing similar supports.
- **Networks:** sponsor groups should be able to demonstrate established links with broader settlement and other community services to facilitate referral and specialist support where needed, as well as networks that would assist in supporting applicants into employment. For sponsor groups that are not ethnic community organisations, strong relationships with the ethnic communities to which the proposed applicants belong should be demonstrated.
- **Human resources:** sponsor groups should be able to demonstrate they have the necessary human resources, either volunteer of paid, to be able to provide support to sponsored refugees for a minimum of 12 months and up to two years. In the case of volunteer groups, this should include appropriate training of volunteers and monitoring and accountability measures to avoid exploitation and burnout of volunteers.

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A sponsorship model should allow for partnerships between different organisations or groups, allowing smaller or less resourced groups to partner with larger organisations. For example, larger faith-based communities may be well placed to provide some of the service infrastructure and material and human resources needed to assist in the resettlement of sponsored refugees and could work closely with a smaller ethnic community organisation or groups of SHP proposers who can provide the cultural and settlement expertise and practical links with refugee communities in Australia and overseas.

**Sponsor group responsibilities**

A number of groups RCOA consulted for this submission emphasised the importance of sponsorship requirements being articulated as simply as possible for volunteer-based community groups to ensure that the process is accessible and that they are empowered to come up with flexible local models that work. Including onerous accountability measures, administrative requirements and overly-proscriptive key performance indicators may exclude some potentially effective, committed and well-resourced volunteer groups.

With regard to what responsibilities sponsors should have and what undertakings they should be required to give (Q.7), RCOA believes that settlement standards must be commensurate under privately-sponsored and Government-funded streams, considering that a sponsored refugee also has gone through the same experience as those who come to Australia on other humanitarian visa categories, and they should be eligible for services equivalent to those provided under the Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) program. At the same time, when assessing a sponsor group’s capacity and responsibilities to provide support, consideration should be given to what other services may need to be provided by other agencies. RCOA considers that different groups are likely to have different capacities to provide support and that each sponsorship proposal should be considered on its own merits. Where a sponsor group is unable or does not have the capacity to provide support in any of the key areas of responsibility, they would need to identify how they would link with an appropriate agency to provide this service, and DIAC would need to assess the overall benefits of the sponsorship arrangement proceeding.

Sponsor groups should cover some or all of the following responsibilities:

- **Administration and liaison:** Identification of applicants for sponsorship, liaison with DIAC on sponsorship application, participation in assessment of capacity of organisation to meet requirements of sponsorship, mobilisation, participation in monitoring and evaluation and other administrative requirements of a sponsor group;
- **Airfares:** Covering the cost of sponsored refugee airfares to Australia;
- **Case management:**
  - Needs assessment and case management plan – this could be done in collaboration with an HSS service if needed, and needs assessment should be reviewed at six and 12 months;
  - Transit assistance – for sponsored refugees who require transit assistance within Australia (e.g. for those settling in regional areas);
  - Reception, property induction and initial food provision – Meeting applicants at the airport and transfer to appropriate short- or long-term accommodation;
  - Essential registrations – to Centrelink, Medicare, Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), schools etc. as per HSS;
  - Orientation – opportunities for linking into existing HSS orientation opportunities could be explored;
  - Health services – ensuring initial health assessments and referrals are made.
- **Short-term and long-term accommodation:** Finding and paying for appropriate short-term accommodation for six weeks and providing support to secure sustainable long-term housing;
- **Basic household goods package:** Equivalent to HSS package.
• **Employment assistance:** While not included as a feature of HSS, RCOA considers support with employment transitions to be one of the potential strengths of a private/community sponsorship model, and one where the potential benefits could reduce the budgetary impact of resettling a greater number of people under the Humanitarian Program. In light of this, groups could be required to identify ways in which they can provide support to sponsored refugees to attain financial self-sufficiency as soon as possible. Such a requirement should recognise that some people may have a lesser or greater capacity to make the transition to work quickly, and should not be tied to the restriction of access to Centrelink. Rather, it should incorporate employment assistance as a key role of sponsor groups that could be monitored and assessed in evaluating the success of a private/community sponsorship model. It should be noted that the timeframes for making this assessment may require a longer outlook but would provide an important measure of the feasibility of a private/community sponsorship program and could be used to inform future sponsorship applications.

With regard to sponsor group responsibilities, it is important to note that requirements should ensure that volunteers are neither required nor sanctioned to provide supports in areas where there are risks to those they are supporting, i.e. providing specialist advice and support that are better provided by education, health and other specialist services.

**Length of sponsor support**

In terms of the timeframe of sponsor support (Q.8 and Q.14), RCOA considers that a minimum of 12 months of support by a sponsor group would provide a commensurate amount of time for on-arrival settlement support to that provided through the HSS. As with refugees supported through HSS, an exit needs assessment should be undertaken to ensure basic settlement needs have been met and an appropriate referral to a Settlement Grants Program (SGP) provider may be required at the end of this formal period of sponsor support. As employment outcomes realistically require a longer timeframe than 12 months, particularly where a sponsored refugee arrives with limited English, RCOA considers that sponsor groups should be able to provide employment support for two years.

**5. Eligibility of sponsored refugees to other services and supports**

As highlighted above, RCOA considers it important that sponsored refugees receive the necessary and equivalent supports to other resettled refugees to be able to successfully settle in Australia. In terms of what government services sponsored refugees should be able to access once they are in Australia (Q.10), the key entitlements should be:

- **Centrelink** – although some expectation of greater support and success in transitioning to financial self-sufficiency should be incorporated in a private/community sponsorship model, this should not exclude or limit eligibility to Centrelink as a basic safety net and entitlement of any permanent resident;
- **Medicare** – same access as any other permanent resident;
- **AMEP** – entitlement to 510 hours as per other humanitarian entrants;
- **Torture and trauma services** – referral as required;
- **Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS)** – the need to access TIS may be reduced, particularly when the sponsor group is partnered with or is an ethnic community organisation, but sponsored refugees should not be excluded from eligibility to TIS, particularly when communicating with essential services;
- **Any other government services that other permanent residents are eligible to access** – this includes education, employment and health services;
- **Complex Case Support (CCS)** – although the selection of potential applicants should where possible consider complex cases as more appropriately referred for support by funded HSS providers, it should be recognised that complexities and vulnerabilities of sponsored refugees may emerge after settlement that are beyond the capacity of a sponsor group to address. In these cases, referral for CCS may be required and eligibility should be open to sponsored
refugees to access CCS. This would also provide a safety net (Q.15) for those sponsored under such a program and for the sponsor groups;

- SGP – potential for referral to SGP services after 12 months.

In terms of eligibility for HSS services (Q.9), those that RCOA consulted suggested that sponsor groups could or should have the capacity to provide a large proportion of the services provided by HSS contractors and would not require HSS services, but that sponsor groups could potentially link in with local HSS services to ascertain where services could be provided with minimal cost impact for providers, for example, expanding access to orientation for some sponsored refugees or including sponsor group volunteers in HSS volunteer induction and training. This would need to be negotiated with an HSS provider prior to a proposal to sponsor being made to DIAC.

6. Coordination, evaluation and accountability

There are a number of measures that the Government could implement to help sponsors meet their sponsorship commitments (Q.16). RCOA suggests that in the first instance a support structure would need to be established to act as a central coordinating body. This role could potentially be fulfilled by establishing a structure within DIAC, which would probably be more feasible in the context of a small pilot program, or by contracting this out to a national organisation in the case of an expanded program.

Drawing on the Proposer Support Program model proposed in 2007, such an overarching coordinating structure could potentially act in the following ways to oversee the implementation of a sponsorship program:

- Develop and manage sponsor groups including recruitment, screening, training, registration/accreditation, mentoring and support;
- Assist in preparing and gaining approval of sponsor group settlement plans;
- Support financial planning and literacy training;
- Engage in active interagency service collaboration;
- Disseminate information to sponsor groups to use in the wider sector about the private/community sponsorship program;
- Engage in service system development - i.e. education, health, migration advice etc;
- Manage proposer application preparation, support and training;
- Manage communication between support groups, DIAC and overseas posts about applications.
- Act as an independent body where a sponsored refugee can raise concerns about their sponsor group, including making a referral to another sponsor group where necessary if the original sponsor group fails to meet its responsibilities (Q.18).

Accountability

In terms of the questions about accountability and compliance (Q.12) – including the potential role of a payment of a bond play in ensuring that sponsors adequately provide for sponsored refugees (Q.13) and other potential sanctions if sponsors fail to meet their responsibilities (Q.17), RCOA considers that a bond would not be an appropriate sanction or means of encouraging sponsor accountability, particularly when considering that many potential sponsor groups would be volunteer-based organisations with limited resources and which draw more heavily on in-kind resources and fundraising ability. For example, if a sponsor group was unable to meet responsibilities, how could it be expected that volunteers pay a financial penalty? Which volunteer or which donor would pay? Administratively, this would also be complicated.

A more appropriate means of accountability and compliance would be to ensure the adequate assessment of sponsor group applications at the outset, with groups required to demonstrate their capacity in terms of the minimal requirements outlined in Section 4 (i.e. resource base, governance, networks, expertise, human resources) and through intermittent monitoring and
support throughout the sponsorship process (as outlined above in terms of the function of a coordinating body). Where groups fail to meet sponsorship requirements, an appropriate sanction may be to disallow future sponsorship applications or to impose specific conditions which ensure future compliance.

**Monitoring and evaluation**

With regard to the question of how sponsors should be monitored to ensure their responsibilities to the sponsored refugee are being met (Q.11), RCOA believes that the role of monitoring and evaluation of a pilot private/community sponsorship program should be undertaken by an independent body with input from a panel of experts – including DIAC, settlement services and peak bodies. The timeframe for monitoring and evaluation should be at least two years to ensure the evaluation incorporates an assessment of employment outcomes as well as the provision of basic settlement supports.

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