Executive summary

Background

Australia's immigration policy aims to balance social, economic, humanitarian and environmental objectives. Over the last ten years more than 1.5 million migrants have settled in Australia. The immigration program has two components, the Migration Program for Skilled and Family Stream migrants and the Humanitarian Program for refugees and others in humanitarian need.

Australia accepts Humanitarian Program entrants (humanitarian entrants) as a part of its responsibility to help people who have been persecuted and are in need of resettlement. Australia has signed several international conventions which set out our legal and moral obligations to protect refugees.

The Commonwealth, through its Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), determine the immigration numbers and manage the movement and settlement of people in and out of Australia. The Commonwealth also decides the initial destination of humanitarian settlement within the various States and Territories.

Of the different categories of new arrivals to Australia, those in the Humanitarian Program are some of the most vulnerable, and face many difficulties and challenges. There are two main categories within this stream. They are:

- the offshore resettlement component – people who are living in another country or in a refugee camp at the time of seeking resettlement
- the onshore/asylum component – people who apply for protection after they arrive in Australia such as irregular maritime arrivals.

This audit focused on the first group, that is, humanitarian entrants who applied for and were granted permanent residency to settle in Australia while living overseas.

Humanitarian entrants arrive in Australia from many different parts of the world. All will have suffered persecution. This may have been from arbitrary arrest, interrogation or detention, traumatic experiences such as loss of or separation from family, or even physical abuse including assault and in extreme cases, torture.

In 2010–11, the Commonwealth spent around $390 million on post-arrival settlement services for humanitarian entrants and other eligible migrants. This typically includes individual support through the Humanitarian Settlement Services Program which consists of intensive assistance for six to 12 months. Individuals are connected to services, referred to organisations and provided with basic household goods and counselling. Some humanitarian entrants also access ongoing settlement assistance for up to five years under the Commonwealth Settlement Grants Program.

Of the 132,000 people who came to Australia through the Humanitarian Program in the last ten years, over 31,000 came to New South Wales. The NSW Government provides mainstream government services such as education, health care and transport to all residents within New South Wales, including humanitarian entrants. It must ensure that access to these services is equitable and has regard to the linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic diversity of the people of New South Wales.

This audit examined how well New South Wales responds to the settlement needs of humanitarian entrants.

Conclusion

New South Wales is not meeting its responsibility to humanitarian entrants as well as it could. There is no overall settlement plan for New South Wales that responds to the needs of either current or expected humanitarian entrants. This means that New South Wales is not influencing the settlement of humanitarian entrants, for example by identifying where and what are the necessary supports and opportunities that will best assist humanitarian entrants to make a life in New South Wales.
To be able to plan better, New South Wales needs to collect good and useful information regarding humanitarian entrants.

The NSW Government Immigration and Settlement Planning Committee (NSW GISP) is not fulfilling its role for humanitarian entrant settlement as well as it could. The NSW GISP needs to be reinvigorated if it is to fulfil its original mandate.

Once humanitarian entrants have arrived in New South Wales, they need to be supported to settle well. Currently there is little coordination by NSW Government agencies in responding to humanitarian entrants’ needs.

The Community Relations Commission For a multicultural New South Wales (CRC) is the lead NSW Government agency on multicultural affairs. All NSW Government agencies are required to report annually to the CRC on how they meet the Principles of Multiculturalism. Agency compliance with this requirement needs to improve so agencies can be held accountable.

We found that the CRC consults widely with government agencies, non-government service providers and community members, including humanitarian entrants. But it needs to strengthen its focus on humanitarian entrants. For this vulnerable group, the CRC also needs to drive accountability and coordination and be the ‘go-to place’ for all humanitarian issues.

Supporting findings

In assessing New South Wales’ response to the settlement needs of humanitarian entrants we examined:

- how well does New South Wales plan for the arrival and initial settlement of humanitarian entrants?
- after orientation, how well does New South Wales meet the ongoing needs of humanitarian entrants?

How well does New South Wales plan for the arrival and initial settlement of humanitarian entrants?

New South Wales does not have an overall plan to respond to the settlement needs of current or expected humanitarian entrants. New South Wales does not currently recommend settlement locations, or undertake research into more favourable settlement locations, as other States do.

New South Wales does not currently collect or contribute any information to the Commonwealth on where humanitarian entrants may have the best opportunities to settle well, i.e. where there are employment possibilities, affordable housing, a supportive environment and appropriate services.

In 2005, the NSW GISP was established to support the NSW Government’s commitment to a coordinated approach to settlement planning. The NSW GISP has not developed a plan that includes the settlement of humanitarian entrants in New South Wales.

Resettlement in New South Wales is an opportunity for humanitarian entrants to rebuild their lives in safety. However, we found that humanitarian entrants were doing less well in New South Wales than in other States on key indicators of health and housing. Barriers to successful settlement include difficulties in housing, employment, education, language services, health and family issues.

After orientation, how well does New South Wales meet the ongoing needs of humanitarian entrants?

New South Wales does not have a coordinated approach to assisting agencies to support humanitarian entrants.

In the absence of an overall framework, there are gaps and duplication in the services provided by NSW Government agencies.
The problems humanitarian entrants are encountering are well known to the CRC, the Department of Premier and Cabinet and NSW Government agencies.

Very little information is received by New South Wales on the number, destination and background of humanitarian entrants being settled in New South Wales either prior to or after their arrival. Such information would be valuable to NSW Government agencies and other stakeholders to help them to prepare and provide appropriate services.

Agencies we spoke to told us that they need more information such as the anticipated arrival date, characteristics, needs and initial settlement location of humanitarian entrants to better plan and assist this group.

We found that the CRC has multiple consultative mechanisms. These also identify many humanitarian concerns. However, while these structures fill a gap in bringing agencies together, agencies told us they are primarily information-sharing rather than action oriented structures. A coordinated, end-to-end approach is needed to elevate and solve the concerns of the NSW Government agencies, non-government organisations and humanitarian entrants.

All NSW agencies are required to have a multicultural plan, and to report annually on how they meet the Principles of Multiculturalism in the conduct of their affairs. The Multicultural Policy and Services Program (MPSP) is the mechanism the CRC uses to report on the effectiveness of public authorities in observing the Principles of Multiculturalism. Agency compliance has varied.

Currently the MPSP report does not include results or outcomes specific to humanitarian entrants. Given the many concerns of agencies with the needs of humanitarian entrants and the services they require, CRC would be unable to readily determine the access and equity of this group for services under the current format.