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REVIEW OF AUSTRALIA'S 2017–18 HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMME - SUBMISSION

Catholic Social Services Victoria¹ and member organisations² wish to make a submission to the review in response to the invitation in the [Discussion Paper Australia's Humanitarian Programme 2017–18](#).

Urgently increase the Syrian refugee special intake

We strongly recommend to the Australian Government that it urgently increase the Syrian refugee special intake by a further 12,000 persons.

Syria and surrounding countries are the scene of one of the largest ever refugee and displaced persons tragedies.

Catholic Social Services Victoria and member organisations acknowledge the Australian Government's achievement in bringing Syrian refugees to Australia over the past two years. We note that between July 2015 and March 2017 Australia has taken in just over 19,000 people from Syria and Iraq, while 21,483 visas have been granted to people displaced by conflict in Syria and Iraq³.

The Hon Peter Dutton, Minister for Immigration and Border Control has previously indicated that the Government would look to increasing the special intake beyond the 12,000 if it was "satisfied with the integrity of the process"⁴. While the Australian special intake was much slower than other countries, it appears to have been very successful, if the costs of the wait to desperate people are not taken into account. Catholic Social Services Victoria believes that Australia is well able to take in more Syrian refugees given the volume, extent and duration of the atrocities in Syria, with

¹ Catholic Social Services Victoria is a peak body for Catholic community service organisations in Victoria. Our 50 member organisations work across the whole range of human services, across the State. www.css.org.au provides details of our member organisations and our work.

² Organisations that have contributed to this submission, and who support it, include:

- Brigidine Asylum Seeker Support Program
- CatholicCare
- Edmund Rice Community and Refugee Services
- Jesuit Social Services
- Melbourne Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office
- Missionary Sisters of Service
- St Vincent de Paul Society, Victoria

³ <https://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Refu/response-syrian-humanitarian-crisis> accessed 11 April 2017

⁴ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-21/peter-dutton-open-to-accepting-more-refugees-from-syria/8027124>



no immediate resolution in prospect, and given the desperate living conditions of displaced persons in refugee camps and elsewhere.

We urge the Government to urgently extend the special intake of Syrian refugees by a further 12,000 places.

Increasing the annual humanitarian intake

We note and support the decision by the Government to increase the general humanitarian intake from 13,750 to 18,750, given the plight of more than 60 million refugees and displaced people worldwide. We note that the Government reviews the annual intake each year having regard to global resettlement need and the demand for protection visa grants onshore.

While the Government proudly points to its contribution in settling refugees, the numbers settled are less than 10% of Australia's overall annual migrant intake⁵. Refugees add to aggregate demand in every sector of the economy and support the future growth and multicultural character of the nation.

While we note the increase of the annual humanitarian intake to 18,750, we recommend that this figure, small as it is within the overall migration program, should be regarded as a minimum within each annual review of the program, and that if UNHCR global statistics increase, the Government consider increasing the intake in that year.

Close Manus and Nauru, bring refugees here

We call upon the Government to close the Manus Island and Nauru facilities and relocate to Australia both asylum seekers in detention and those on both Manus Island and Nauru who have been granted refugee status.

To deter boat arrivals by sending people to offshore detention camps is morally flawed. No person should be mistreated as a means to achieving some other end. Unfortunately, the debates on refugees and asylum seekers in Australia have focussed on trying to find 'the lesser of two evils' rather than finding an effective, just and compassionate response that ends both drownings at sea and the abusive conditions in offshore detention facilities.

The conditions on Manus Island and the threat of deportation to persecution and harm is placing lives at risk, and adding to the fear and suffering of asylum seekers and refugees. Rather than showing compassion and respect to people seeking refuge, we have left them in limbo and deprived them of hope. They have a right to live without fear.

Leaders in mental health and trauma response, Professor Patrick McGorry and Paris Aristotle, have stressed the harm that is being caused as long as current arrangements remain in place. The Australian Audit Office has put the cost to the Australian Government of detention on Manus Island and Nauru at more than \$570,000 per

⁵ 2015–16 Migration Programme Report Programme year to 30 June 2016, Dept Immigration and Border Protection.



person per year, which compares with just \$33,000 for people on bridging visas in the Australian community.

Rather than spending more on continuing inhumane detention, we call on the Australian Government to relocate to Australia those currently in offshore detention, and to create education, work opportunities and housing support to benefit all Australians, including those newly arrived.

We urge the Government to find a more humane way that will result in dignity rather than serious life-long damage to those who have sought safe haven in Australia. It is not beyond us as a nation to provide orderly assessments of claims in Australia without this awful human cost. The Government's leadership in this regard is crucial.

We are here to provide support to any such an endeavour. Our Catholic agencies are among the many organisations that provide accommodation, health services, education and social support for people seeking refuge in Australia.

It is time the Australian Government abandoned the practice of offshore punishment and honoured its international obligations to people seeking a safe place to call home.

Our Recommendations

1. The Australian Government should urgently increase the Syrian refugee special intake by a further 12,000 persons.
2. The annual intake of 18,750 persons should be regarded as a minimum within each annual review of the program, and if UNHCR global statistics increase, the Government should consider increasing the intake in that year
3. The Government should immediately relocate all asylum seekers and refugees on Manus Island and Nauru to Australia.

Yours faithfully

Denis Fitzgerald
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