**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL – AUSTRALIA**

**TOOWOOMBA GROUP**

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Email: aitoowoomba@gmail.com

 18th January, 2021

**The Treasurer**

**Parliament House**

**Canberra. ACT.**

***Re: Making Community Sponsorship Program for Refugees fairer and more accessible***

Dear Treasurer

As a member of a community with a record of supporting refugees, I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Treasury on the 2021-22 Federal Budget.

I wish to urge serious pre-budget consideration for for funding proposed improvements to the Community Sponsorship for Refugees under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program as part of Federal Budget expenditure planning.

Enclosed here is our submission summarizing our key recommendations on how the current program can be enhanced for the benefit of both refugees and the Australian community.

As a wealthy country with a long-standing tradition of resettling refugees, Australia can and must do more to address the global crisis facing refugees. Increasing the intake in the 2021-22 Budget through an improved Community Sponsorship will benefit not only refugees but also Australia’s economy and society.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Yours faithfully,

Philip Armit

**Convenor**

**Amnesty International Australia – Toowoomba Group.**

**SUBMISSION FOLLOWS**

**SUBMISSION TO REVIEW OF COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP OF REFUGEES PROGRAM**

Toowoomba has a long and proud history in resettling and supporting refugees. The Toowoomba community strongly supports the concept of a Refugee Community Sponsorship Program but the existing Program has flaws. We commend the government for reviewing it.

Essentially, an improved CSP should offer an additional and more accessible pathway for settling and absorbing refugees in cities and regional centres such as Toowoomba city as well as centres in its region. An improved program should allow community groups in regional towns such as Roma, Charleville, Thargomindah to sponsor refugee families. Regional towns, with declining population and where local industries are lacking a workforce, could benefit significantly. Local, community-based sponsors could bring in refugees already matched with specific jobs. The economic and social benefits to both refugees and the towns could be life-changing.

Toowoomba is a large regional city with more than two decades of experience in refugee settlement which has given rise to a social infrastructure that supports and complements the work of settlement agencies here. With further development, Toowoomba could become a regional hub for training and developing support networks for refugee sponsor groups and sponsor support groups in regional centres. This potential for this will be evident in the comments below from individuals and organisations who have shared in that settlement experience.

**Proposed changes**

Along with other like-minded Australian communities, we call on the government to design a more accessible Refugee Community Support Program which

* provides places for refugees in addition to the government’s humanitarian intake
* provides appropriate support and services for refugees and communities settling them
* is affordable and sustainable
* allows community groups, families and businesses to act as sponsors, and provides training and support to sponsor groups

**TOOWOOMBA’S STORY – More than twenty years of refugee settlement**

**THE COMMITMENT**

**Cr Paul Antonio,**

**Mayor**

**Toowoomba Regional Council.**

*In 2013 the Toowoomba Regional Council unanimously decided to become a Refugee Welcome Zone.  Prior to that we had been receiving a limited number of refugees on a regular basis.  In recent years that number has grown dramatically and, prior to COVID19, has reached a maximum of around 1100 people per year.*

*In this community refugees are welcome and our community goes out of its way to support them.  In saying this, there is a critical role played by external funders, particularly the Federal Government,  to help us welcome and integrate those who have made their way to Toowoomba in difficult circumstances, to make a brand new start in life.*

*I applaud the work of Amnesty International Australia and look forward to cooperating, not only with the national body, but particularly with our Toowoomba branch, to help in the integration process.*

*I personally strongly agree with broad community support being given to the integration of these people following the trauma of their journey.*

**THE EXPERIENCE**

**Garry Humphries**

**Manager**

**Community Development, Facilities & Tourism, Toowoomba Regional Council**

*Since late 1990’s, Toowoomba has been home to a growing population of refugees and migrants. The South Sudanese refugees started arriving in 1996. The following year, Toowoomba and Shepparton were chosen to pilot regional settlement of South Sudanese. Toowoomba is now home to more than 2300 South Sudanese. South Sudanese were followed by people from Darfur and Congo. Since then Toowoomba has welcomed and settled in thousands of refugees from Sudan, Chad, Congo, Eritrea and more recently those from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Middle East. In 2013 the first group of at-risk Afghan women arrived and settled in Toowoomba and more recently, several thousand Yazidis from Syria and northern Iraq have joined us.*

*Diverse groups and organisations have grown up to welcome and settle newcomers –faith and church and other voluntary groups, business and industry related groups, NGOs, and funded settlement services. They work together to play an essential role in supporting refugees by encouraging their participation socially, culturally, and economically. The cooperative engagement of these groups in the complex tasks of welcome and settlement have made an enormous contribution to the development of our capacity to meet challenges and to the social cohesion and resilience of our regional communities. Refugee settlement has had a positive benefit in our community.*

*As our capacity expands, we will realise more of the potential economic benefits of regional settlement as the skills and knowledge that refugees bring are better identified and accommodated in our economic sector.*

*We commend the government for its review of the present Refugee Community Sponsorship Program and we enthusiastically support the proposal for an improved, more accessible scheme.*

**THE CONNECTIONS**

***Kate Venables,***

***Executive Director,***

***Catholic Care Social Services***

*As a City of Welcome, Toowoomba has a diverse population with just under 12% identifying as migrants and/or former refugees.  CatholicCare’s TRAMS\* program, grown from grass roots commitment and passion, has been intimately involved in settling different refugee cohorts for the past 15 years and so is well placed to understand the value that regional settlement can provide to a large city.  Given our settlement model works with refugees from 12 months to 5 years of living in Australia, we have to ensure we are working closely with a wide range of services and people in community and can point to the benefits that our city as a whole has gained as different communities have made Toowoomba home. Encouraging sponsorship following the proposed CSP model would see both the newly arrived refugees and the broader community continue to grow and flourish.*

*CatholicCare is very pleased to support a fairer community sponsorship program for refugees, that would allow individual community members and wider society to support* refugees *coming to Australia, settling in sustainable ways and becoming contributing citizens.*

***\*****TRAMS – Toowoomba Refugee and Migrant Services*

**THE CAPACITY – The social and physical infrastructure**

As in other communities, Toowoomba has groups - networks of service providers, faith-based and other volunteer groups which have developed services around providing various types of support to refugees. Services of generalist organisations, such as service associations, community & neighbourhood centres and so on, mesh with those specific refuges support groups. Under an improved Refugee Community Sponsorship Program, sponsors would be able to tap into this ready social infrastructure to deliver improved integration outcomes for refugees arriving here via that pathway.

*[OVER]*

**Jason Higlett**

**Cross Cultural Worker**

**Hume Ridge Church of Christ**

*For a number of years, we have supported the local refugee community through formal programs such as English classes and assisting children with school work and study. Pre-COVID, we would have an average of 80 to 90 adults attending English classes and 100 to 120 children attending homework help per week. We use the church buses to pick up children without transport from school and drop them home after classes. This work has often resulted in members of HumeRidge visiting refugee families in their homes, offering practical support and developing caring relationships.*

*As a church, we would welcome the introduction of an improved model of sponsorship that would create an easier pathway for resettlement and result in better outcomes for families and individuals. We are looking to expand our level of support and explore different opportunities to engage with newly arrived refugees*

**Kirsten Smolenski,**

**Chairperson Board of Directors,**

**PEACEful Humans Inc**

*PEACEful Humans Inc began in 2015 with a broad objective of reducing social isolation and in the years since, a range of projects and activities to build community connection have been developed and implemented.*

*Of most interest is the Language Therapy Group, providing trauma-based language therapy classes for migrant and refugee women suffering from politically generated trauma. Run by volunteers, these classes use client-based holistic methods to bring participants to a place where they form bonds, connect with each other and with community members and gain a sense of competence as learners. Art and music therapy, community outings and support groups form part of this process. Our experience indicates that without this kind of support, many refugee women are unable to access and participate in other funded services such as formal English language learning.*

***Sally Fischer,***

***Manager***

***East Creek Community Centre***

*East Creek Community Centre (‘East Creek’ or ‘the Centre’) is a safe, judgment-free haven where people can express themselves and be part of a dynamic community, especially for those who are at risk of or currently experiencing social isolation.  We operate social groups, encourage and promote the development of sustainable friendships and ventures, have opportunities for personal development in a multitude of areas, and undertake advocacy and liaising with the Department of Communities, Queensland Council of Social Services on social issues. Pre-COVID, we had 220 individuals take part in our activities and services, which added up in total to 1500+ interactions with people for that quarter. We can accommodate a sizable number of people within each of our diverse activities. We partner with a wide variety of organisations to ensure that those with specific needs or needs that East Creek cannot accommodate, are met.*

*Under an improved Community Refugee Sponsorship arrangement, East Creek would be well placed to offer activities and services that could provide refugees with skills and offer many opportunities for meeting and building relationships with other community members.*

**THE FUTURE POTENTIAL**

***Kate Venables,***

***Executive Director,***

***Catholic Care Social Services***

*Catholic Care Social Services Given Toowoomba’s significant reputation as a City of Welcome, our city is clearly invested in our multicultural and diverse success and in the participation of refugees as contributing citizens. The value of the proposed CSP model is that it provides great opportunity for different sectors of mainstream society to support and work with increased numbers of refugees in carefully planned and organised ways.  Toowoomba has experience in successfully settling refugees, relying largely on government funded services, but the CSP model allows for much greater participation from broader society and therefore upskills far more people to be able to support new arrivals to develop sustainable independence.*

*The improved CSP Model provides clear guidelines for ‘regular’ community members to become involved in the settlement process that have been tried and tested internationally and nationally and point to overall the growth of all members of the community –>. all of which enables current settlement services like CatholicCare’s TRAMS to be part of a capacity building model that everyone benefits from.*

Toowoomba Refugee and Migrant Services (TRAMS) is a good example for a settlement support organisation which grew from a grass-roots action group into a respected settlement service with recognised expertise in settlement.

When committed individuals collaborate to welcoming and settling refugees, their efforts help to develop both their own expertise and extensive connections within their communities. This helps to build the social infrastructure which can deliver successful integration outcomes of refugees and their new communities.

Philip Armit

**Convenor**

**Amnesty International Australia – Toowoomba Group**