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Submission to the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs re. the Discussion Paper: Reforming Australia's Settlement Grants Programs

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia, 19 October 2026

About Jesuit Refugee Service

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Discussion Paper on Reforming Australia's Settlement Grants Programs.

JRS is an international Catholic organisation working in over 57 countries to accompany, serve and advocate for people seeking asylum and migrants in situations of vulnerability. In Australia, JRS provides frontline services and advocacy in Western Sydney, supporting more than 3,400 people annually. In Australia, JRS works primarily alongside people seeking asylum, many of whom have limited access to the settlement assistance and supports available to migrants and humanitarian entrants under Australia's Settlement Grants programs. While we do not currently provide grant-funded settlement services, through JRS Australia's Employment and Refugee Leadership Programs, we play a significant role providing generalist support to vulnerable migrants that did not receive the support they needed through existing channels.

In making this submission, we want to draw attention to this gap, and provide insights from our frontline services. Foremost, we are making a submission to convey feedback from people with lived experience who have accessed settlement services in Australia and provided their responses to JRS Australia anonymously. This group represents people at various stages of their settlement journeys, and includes refugees, humanitarian entrants, and people who have sought asylum in-country. This group is not intended to represent all cohorts' views on settlement services, but to provide a snapshot of some individuals' lived experiences and their recommendations for improving accessibility of services and pathways to education and training for migrants and humanitarian entrants.

The meaningful participation of people with lived experience is essential to inform the future design of settlement support services that are easier for clients to navigate, focused on long-term outcomes, responsive to diverse needs and pathways, aligned to economic participation, economic security and social connection, and are capable of supporting successful settlement over time. We hope the below submission will contribute to this process.

1. Making settlement support easier to access and navigate

Participants highlighted that finding the right support can be difficult, particularly when people are unfamiliar with Australian systems or do not know which organisation to approach. At least two-third of the people we serve did not receive settlement support when they first arrived in Australia. Finding services also remains very difficult for some: with half of respondents to JRS describing the experience as "very difficult", and the majority saying they had to contact several organisations before they could get the support they needed.

One respondent explained: *"Getting the right agency to connect me to the right services was not easy but when I got JRS I was now easy to connect."* Another reflected on arriving in Australia in the 1990s, when community support was less accessible: *"Settling in country with not speaking the language, not having the support like now where there are communities to help us settle in and find the way when we landed in the 1990s there were no communities as now to help us settle in and find the way."* Other respondents described the difficulty of finding reliable information and knowing where to turn. One, who also noted the complexity of finding information without access to community, wrote: "*There is no proper channel or readily available online materials*." Another recommended the need for a "*common platform that everyone can access*". These experiences demonstrate that accessible settlement services must help people understand their options, navigate other services and connect with the appropriate support.

Another respondent said a more helpful process would involve *"kind understanding of my situation*", underscoring the importance of respectful, dignified, individualised and holistic engagement with people settling in Australia. A referral alone is not sufficient where people face language barriers, have limited knowledge of available services, or are managing several competing needs. JRS Australia's experience is that people arrive under diverse circumstances, with varying priorities and levels of familiarity with Australian systems. Some may need intensive support to establish themselves, while others may need help with a specific issue, or require new support as they progress through their settlement journey. Funded settlement services need the flexibility to respond to these differences, otherwise the burden shifts to organisations like JRS, or indeed diaspora communities, to bridge the gap for people who have fallen through the cracks and ended up in crisis.

We recommend that an integrated model prioritise supported referrals, clear and accessible information, intentional follow-up and coordination between providers. Integration should focus

on reducing the burden on people to navigate the system themselves, in addition to the review of how services are funded or administered.

2. Employment and education require practical, sustained support

Employment and education were the clearest priorities in the feedback: two-third of our clients selected finding work, and four selected education and training as areas settlement services should focus on most. Other priorities include housing and financial security, and health and wellbeing. This is consistent with our experience in our Employment Program, where we work with over 120 people each year facing barriers to safe, secure and ongoing work. Financial independence and economic participation are essential building blocks to ensure families can meet their own need, and feel safe and settled in Australia.

Participants described the value of practical assistance in this process, including support to prepare CVs, apply for jobs, set achievable goals, access study and connect with other services. One stated: *"JRS Employment Service helped me to build a CV, to apply for jobs and did advocacy for me."* Another person described the importance of connections to education and other support: *"Life without barriers and JRS help me to the support I needed, specifically connected me with Centrelink and studying at TAFE and MCC."*

The people we work with also identified barriers that can persist even when they are motivated to work or study. These included English language difficulties, work experience requirements, limited support or networks, and the cost and complexity of having overseas qualifications recognised. One respondent described the barriers that come with *"being from a small country* [where] *none of your qualifications are worth it*", in the eyes of the Australian system. Another recommended: "*simplifying the process of matching [] certificates and making the associated costs free*." Overwhelmingly we see the people we serve intent on working and up-skilling, but facing barriers to do so. One respondent highlighted the value of "*free study opportunities and training*" and needing "*people to lead the way*".

Effective settlement services designed to increase access to employment and economic participation require service providers that will understand these barriers and navigate them alongside services users from start to finish. An illustrative example of this is Ahmad's Story.[1] Ahmad continues his ongoing, multi-year effort to rebuild his career as a doctor in public health in Australia, despite his ample qualifications and prestigious work experience.

[1] Ahmad's name and details have been changed to safeguard his anonymity. His story is available here on our website.

These experiences speak to the importance of practical assistance and coordination between employment support, education and other services, and the need for longevity of support. People may reasonably need help to navigate several systems before they can pursue sustainable employment, and prior to this, finding a job is not the only relevant outcome: access to suitable training, recognition of existing skills and opportunities to progress are important to longer-term economic security and successful settlement.

We recommend settlement services support coordination between settlement, education and employment services, with a focus on practical assistance with qualifications recognition, training pathways and job readiness, and greater scope for recognition of the complexity of each individual. Particularly for vulnerable migrants, outcome measures should recognise progress towards sustainable employment and skills development, not only immediate job placement.

3. Language access and clear information are essential, but lacking

We understand feedback on language programs is outside the scope of this consultation, however access to in-language services and information are key to all settlement support services. Language barriers in particular were raised repeatedly in feedback to the survey. Respondents described difficulties communicating in English, learning English, and understanding how to access services. One respondent recommended*: "Full availability of interpret[er]s during the first days,"* and another identified the lack of *"proper channel or readily available online materials."* Clear information and in-language resources need to go hand in hand to ensure this information is accessible to CALD communities in practice.

In our experience, language barriers can dramatically affect a person's ability to understand their rights and options, access healthcare and education, engage with government systems, and obtain employment. They can also make it harder to identify the right service, explain what support is needed, and limit perception of a person's capacity, skill, and future goals. While language needs and support to access information may be particularly acute in the early stages of arrival, difficulties continue beyond the initial settlement period. This is particularly the case in certain demographics: those who may have been supported within their own communities initially but then ultimately need more self-sufficiency; elderly migrants and others with complex needs; and other vulnerable migrants, particularly women who have faced violence, who were managing more immediate concerns on arrival that precluded engagement in early settlement services.

People may require specialist interpretation, practical assistance to understand or complete processes, and access to digital platforms and devices, before in-language resources reach them. Services must account for the time required to establish this level of informed and participative understanding, which can equip people with independence and agency much sooner. For many women we serve, for example, a primary barrier to accurate healthcare and health information is the scarcity of female interpreters, and interpreters with health-related knowledge. As a result, women and children may miss out on opportunities for early healthcare intervention, which in turn increases barriers to community and economic participation.[2]

We recommend that redesigned and integrated settlement services provide sufficient flexibility and resources for service providers to respond to individual communication needs, and access, not only provision, be treated as a core component of settlement support. This may include increasing access to appropriate interpreters, translated information, culturally safe and representative service providers who specialise in communicating with CALD communities.

4. Community connections and trusted relationships support settlement

To support engagement with community, respondents identified community involvement, mentoring, flexibility and ongoing contact as helpful in building connections. One reflected: *"The more we got involved the more everything started to become clearer."* Another highlighted the importance of maintaining contact with people receiving support: *"Keeping in touch with them."*

These responses support an integrated model of settlement services, on the basis that settlement is not limited to accessing individual services. One respondent recommended that successful services would "*make them feel welcome to settle in easier stronger and faster*." Relationships and community participation help people build confidence, understand their new environment and develop a sense of belonging, and this feeds back into supporting sustainable engagement with services. Our work also illustrates the contribution that community organisations can make in this area. Trusted organisations can provide practical assistance while also creating opportunities for people to participate, develop skills and agency, and build their own relationships.

Refugee-led initiatives are particularly important because they enable people with lived experience to contribute their knowledge, support others and shape the communities in which

[2] See JRS Australia's Submission to the NSW Government on Access to Healthcare here.

they live. Participation and ownership foster self-motivation and agency, and this in turn enables people to navigate their settlement journey in the most sustainable way for them. As a service provider supporting these goals, we understand this work requires time and flexibility. Meaningful relationships cannot necessarily be established within a fixed number of appointments or a short service period. A model focused narrowly on time-limited outputs will risk overlooking opportunities to build trust and support sustained participation, which furnishes better settlement results, more efficiently, in the long-term.

We recommend that the integrated model prioritise funding for social connection and community participation as important settlement outcomes alongside economic participation. Funding and outcome measures should allow for relationship-based work, mentoring, community-led activities and sustained engagement that is responsive to participants' needs.

5. Eligibility and access for people who fall outside settlement programs

JRS Australia primarily supports people seeking asylum, including people who are still awaiting decisions about their protection claims. Their circumstances differ from those of people who have been granted protection or arrived as humanitarian entrants, including in their eligibility for government assistance, their ability to study or work, and their access to financial and other supports.

While we understand this consultation focuses on the future of SETS, YTS and EPRI, we want to take this opportunity to highlight that a redesign of settlement services might support people with significant settlement-related needs, when they do not currently meet program eligibility requirements. An integrated model should also recognise the contribution of services, like those provided by JRS, outside formal settlement programs. In our feedback, people identified JRS support as helpful in navigating services, accessing employment assistance and building community connections.

In our feedback, people identified JRS support as helpful in navigating services, accessing employment assistance and building community connections. One respondent also asked that people "*who had to be forced to leave their children behind*" be prioritised for family reunion. While family reunion involves processes beyond settlement services alone, this response highlights how family separation can shape people's wellbeing and settlement, the value of clear referral pathways to appropriate advice and support. People, particularly in the absence of family and community, continue to rely on trusted organisations for assistance that extends beyond the scope of any one program.

We recommend that the Government clarify how eligibility will operate under the proposed integrated model, including whether eligibility criteria will change, and how community organisations can be engaged to bridge gaps. At minimum, the model should also identify appropriate referral pathways for people who need support but are ineligible for funded settlement services, including people seeking asylum. Integration should not leave people with significant needs without a clear pathway to assistance.

6. Recommendations

JRS Australia supports the measures set out in the *Discussion Paper: Reforming Australia's Settlement Grants Programs*, and recommends that the Australian Government:

1. **Improve access and navigation of services,** including through clear information, supported referrals, coordination between providers and follow-up to ensure people receive appropriate assistance.
2. **Support sustainable employment and education outcomes**, including skills recognition, access to training and coordination between settlement, education and employment services.
3. **Provide accessible, language-responsive, and trauma-informed services**, including skilled engagement of specialist interpreters, assistance to navigate complex systems, and flexibility to support vulnerable migrants.
4. **Invest in trusted relationships and recognise the value of community support**, including refugee-led initiatives, mentoring and relationship-based support that may require sustained engagement.
5. **Clarify eligibility and referral pathways under the proposed integrated model**, including how people with significant needs who fall outside program eligibility will be referred for support.

JRS Australia welcomes further opportunities to support the Government to consult with people with lived experience and to contribute to the development of settlement services that respond to the diverse circumstances, needs and aspirations of people settling in Australia.

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