

# Inquiry into Australia's engagement in Afghanistan

Response to questions on notice

Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade

11 February 2022

1. Home Affairs has noted that the government announced \$27.1 million in new funding committed in October 2021 to support four key measures in settling Afghan evacuees: \$8 million to support community organisations; \$6.4 million funding for relevant legal support services; \$4 million to support economic participation; and \$7.9 million to increase mental health support.

## ***What are your views on this new funding and how it is being delivered?***

- AMES welcomes the additional funding and the support for community, legal and mental health.
- AMES believes the community organisations funding is best directed to Afghan community organisations and will work with community to support delivery of projects and promote them to new arrivals. A number of support letters have been provided and discussions held with community organisations to provide support for future projects.
- AMES is working with refugee legal services to support access to this enhanced service and welcomes the additional support, this is a significant area of concern for the evacuees.
- Additionally, AMES has been approached by a number of grassroots community organisations concerned about their lack of capacity and experience to write up applications for funding. A co design approach could be considered for future funding rounds.

## ***Are there any obvious gaps in funding arrangements in relation to settlement services for the Afghan cohort?***

- Additional funding could help reduce instances of domestic/family violence. In the immediate the need is more around funding for crisis situations/intervention responses. In the short to medium term, funding for promoting healthy family relationships and prevention of violence will be important – early intervention with education around Australian cultural and norms.
- Because of the emergency evacuation context, settlement providers have had less information than usual about the profile and needs of the cohort. Additional trained and funded specialist refugee health nurses would facilitate better quality screening and triaging of health and disability issues.
- There is need for disability funding to improve awareness, diagnosis, support, and connection with NDIS-like services (as most are not likely to be eligible for some time)
  - To facilitate social and economic participation for new arrivals with a disability, early identification and intervention is key
  - Additionally, education is needed to address cultural viewpoints that sometimes stigmatise disability.
- Finally, further clarity about which organisations are recipient of this funding and the mechanisms for referral into services would assist service providers in leveraging the newly funded services

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2. AMES mentions (p. 2) the need for service providers to rapidly scale up after scaling down operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## ***Can you provide us a sense of the lag time it took for HSP providers and other support services to sufficiently scale up?***

- By August 2021, AMES had scaled down to a point where only 15 case managers were working in our HSP service in Victoria. Since then AMES has been able to triple our case management workforce, and continues to advertise for case managers and support staff to support the 2021 arrivals and those who continue to arrive in 2022. This has proved challenging in a competitive labour market. AMES subcontractors are in a similar position.
- As noted in our submission, thousands of the LEE arrivals were housed in Melbourne and Adelaide, with short term accommodation sourced in a matter of days. Information such as family composition sometimes became available less than 24 hours before participant arrival, and settlement

accommodation teams were able to quickly identify facilities to allocate rooms, and essential goods to distribute in this space of time.

- Most essential support services were readily available to the cohort in times of acute need (e.g. health services) however a lag to get clients onto income support created flow on effects on response times of services. For example settlement providers typically had to make other arrangements to support clients' financial independence and/or source basic essentials.
- Voluntary and charitable organisations as well as some community organisations needed time (sometimes many weeks) to develop the infrastructure and policy dictating how to operate under a pandemic lockdown scenario. Many voluntary/charitable organisations were closed, and in most cases were not able to visit clients face-to-face until pandemic restrictions were lifted.

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3. AMES mentions the significant community response in Victoria, and that it required significant coordination (p. 3).

***How can greater coordination between HSP and community responses best be achieved in these kinds of scenarios?***

- In a crisis there is often a large outpouring of support, similar to that seen during recent bushfires in South Eastern Australia. Settlement organisations are not always well equipped to coordinate the significant logistics task involved in storing and distributing donations (monetary and material).
- Information flow between all stakeholders was complicated and (understandably) not always complete during the first weeks of the Afghan LEE arrivals.
- To address these issues, AMES suggests a central point of coordination could be appointed for large intakes of humanitarian arrivals. This would offer a single point of contact who understands where funding and donations are flowing and provides a consistent message to every provider organisation.
- Online platforms like GIVIT.com were useful for coordinating emergency relief. They can support scaling up donations and community response in a crisis situation – GIVIT are often funded by Government to rapidly respond in these scenarios.

***How essential is this voluntary and unfunded community assistance?***

- Volunteers can offer critical linkages into community (i.e. the concept of 'bridging' social capital – helping to build networks outside one's own community). Evidence shows that a range of diverse volunteer groups working to support new arrivals will support social cohesion.
  - However, while volunteer work is important, it works to enhance and add value to existing services. Adequate funding is essential to ensure coordination, training and adequate support for volunteers to ensure good settlement outcomes can be realised.
  - Volunteer/unfunded community work should work alongside and not replace the work of trained, trauma-informed, expert practitioners who work closely with new refugee arrivals. The strengths-based approaches of settlement workers builds independence to ultimately rely less on social supports.
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