



Wednesday, 11 April 2018

Community Affairs Legislation Committee
Senate Standing Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
ACT 2600
-- VIA ONLINE PORTAL --

Social Services Legislation Amendment (Encouraging Self-sufficiency for Newly Arrived Migrants) Bill 2018

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs in relation to its inquiry into the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Encouraging Self-sufficiency for Newly Arrived Migrants) Bill 2018 ("Bill").

SCoA represents over 90 agencies in the settlement sector, which comprise the vast majority of organisations across Australia providing settlement support to recently arrived migrants, including those from a refugee background. Our members work directly with a wide range of new arrivals from diverse backgrounds, as well as the mainstream Australian community and various stakeholders.

SCoA believes that Australia should be proud of its multicultural community, and should recognise the role of settlement services in supporting newly arrived migrants. Our members witness firsthand the true value of the contribution made to multicultural Australia by those it welcomes as migrants, as well as the challenges those people face when attempting to settle in their new communities.

We make this submission on behalf of those members and the resilient, hardworking communities they serve.

Recommendation

The Settlement Council of Australia recommends that the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Encouraging Self-sufficiency for Newly Arrived Migrants) Bill be rejected in its current form.

Reasons for Recommendation

The settlement journey of all migrants arriving in Australia can vary dramatically.

Much is discussed about the specific settlement needs of humanitarian entrants, and SCoA of course recognises that this Bill does not impact that cohort. We acknowledge and celebrate the government's ongoing commitment to the supported settlement of refugees and other humanitarian entrants in Australia, and the role of the settlement sector in providing crucial services to those most in need. We note for the record that this cohort in particular is, and should always be, exempt from the newly arrived residents' waiting period (NARWP).

For Australia's migration program to reach its full potential and ensure that all arrivals are able to make a positive contribution to the community and economy, however, it is crucial that recognition be given to the fact that for each family arriving here, the circumstances can be vastly different and are subject to change in an instant. The potential for this to impact those families' settlement prospects must not be underplayed.

While it is well accepted that most migrants coming to Australia, especially through the skilled stream, are well-resourced to settle productively in a short timeframe, there are many groups outside of the humanitarian cohort for whom the settlement journey can become unnecessarily protracted. In these circumstances, SCoA submits that Australia should be ready and willing to support those people so as to ensure they are able to achieve independence as quickly as possible.

Traditional settlement services funded by the federal government are not extended to the majority of migrants,¹ although many of SCoA's members do provide services to the broader migrant population, either through specifically funded activities or the work of dedicated volunteers who generously donate their time to the sector.

In order for settlement in Australia to be effective, and for Australia to reap the benefits that it has for so long enjoyed by maintaining a strong and welcoming migration program, migrants must be made to feel secure and accepted in their new home. To achieve this, it is crucial that all migrants are supported, where necessary, to achieve independence. That is, once a migrant has been granted permanent residency in Australia, it is beholden on Australia to put in place necessary measures to ensure the best possible settlement outcomes for that migrant and their family, and to avoid enacting measures that are counterproductive to that outcome. In doing so, Australia will benefit from a cohort of new Australians who make the highest contributions to society and the economy in the shortest timeframe possible.

Given the significance of relocation as a life-changing event, migrants are particularly vulnerable to hardship. While migrants are celebrated for having high levels of skills, qualifications and, importantly, resilience,² the challenges faced in the migration journey need to be acknowledged and catered for in the setting of government policy and legislation.

By increasing the newly arrived residents' waiting period (NARWP) to three years from two, and by expanding the scope of the NARWP to a number of previously excluded social security payments, SCoA is concerned that a number of migrants who may become vulnerable following their arrival in Australia will be unable to access much needed assistance.

We note that the Bill is intended to protect migrants who fall into significant hardship by providing some exceptions to the NARWP. SCoA strongly supports that approach, and recommends that this be strengthened and properly codified if the Bill is to proceed.

However there are many migrants who may need some support but who would fall outside the stringent test for "significant hardship". SCoA suggests that it is precisely these migrants, who may, for example,

¹ The two main federally funded programs are the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) and the Settlement Grants Program (SGP), both of which have exclusive eligibility for humanitarian entrants and, in the case of the SGP, a small selection of other migrants in regional locations.

² See for example, CGU (2018) *Migrant Small Business Report*.

need short-term access to a parenting payment or bereavement allowance, who would be, if appropriately supported, in the best position to quickly regain their prior level of independence.

However without access to such payments, the issues and hardship facing those migrants are likely to be exacerbated. For this reason, the NARWP may indeed have the unintended consequence of further entrenching them in a position of ongoing hardship, ultimately increasing the long-term economic cost to Australia and denying it significant economic returns. This matter was considered by the Productivity Commission in its 2016 report *Migrant Intake into Australia*, where it considered that extending waiting periods could pose risks not only for migrants themselves, but also for the broader community.³

SCoA takes the view that even the existing NARWP has this potential and should be reviewed in that context. We are concerned that if it is extended by the Bill (both in scope and time), those issues may be magnified.

Conclusion

The benefits Australia has gained, and stands to gain, through migration are well documented and make a compelling case for continuing to support all newly arrived migrants.⁴ There is little argument that our economy, as well as the community more generally, enjoys a dynamic vibrancy thanks in large part to the maintenance of a welcoming migration program that meets both social and economic objectives.

SCoA submits that for this to continue, Australia must not only maintain a migration program that balances social and economic considerations when selecting migrants, but must also ensure adequate and appropriate support is available to all migrants in Australia, should they need it.

In doing so, Australia can prevent long-term burden on social services and the economy more broadly and, indeed, can ensure all migrants who make Australia home achieve the best possible settlement outcomes in the shortest possible time and are therefore able to contribute to their full potential.

It is this, SCoA suggests, that will ensure Australia continues to reap the benefits of migration well into the future, and which precludes the need for the Bill as it is currently written.

We therefore submit that the Bill should be rejected.

We look forward to the opportunity to further elaborate on these matters in the Committee's hearing on 17 April 2018 and, in the meantime, invite the Committee to contact our Chief Executive Officer, Nicholas Tebbey on 02 6282 8515 or info@scoa.org.au if it requires clarification or further information concerning the contents of this submission.

Sincerely,

Dewani Bakkum, Chairperson

³ Productivity Commission (2016) *Migrant Intake Into Australia* Inquiry Report No 77 (Canberra) at p519.

⁴ See for example the Migration Council Australia's 2015 report *Economic Impact of Migration* (2015) (Migration Council Australia and Independent Economics) available at http://migrationcouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2015_EIOM.pdf