

## 5 Settlement of Refugees Admitted to Australia

### *Reception*

*Vietnamese refugees admitted to Australia*

5.1. In response to the plight of the Vietnamese people who fled their country, Australia gave refuge to 748 individuals during 1975:<sup>1</sup> 119 were spouses, minor dependent children and aged or otherwise dependent parents of Australian residents; 63 met the occupational requirements for normal migrant entry; 42 were admitted on compelling compassionate grounds or accepted by religious orders in Australia; 201 were brought from Hong Kong during June 1975 on the grounds that they were most in need of humanitarian assistance which settlement in Australia would provide and were not likely to receive such assistance from another country; and the same criteria were used to select another 323 from Singapore and Malaysia during August 1975.<sup>2</sup>

5.2. The first two of the above-mentioned groups were admitted to Australia under normal immigration criteria and most of the refugees were accommodated by relatives already in Australia. As these individuals and the refugees who were subsequently sponsored by relatives proceeded to private accommodation immediately on arrival, little contact has been had with them by the State or regional offices of either the Department of Social Security or the Commonwealth Employment Service. Little is known therefore about the settlement experiences of this category of person, the difficulties they are encountering in adjusting to life in Australia or the support being provided to assist them in this task. In many ways these people are 'hidden' from both the government and non-government welfare agencies. Accordingly, the Committee is unable to make any comment about the plight and circumstances of these particular refugees.

5.3. A great deal of information has been obtained, however, about the two latter groups of refugees who were admitted on humanitarian grounds—and to a lesser extent about the Timorese refugees who arrived in 1975 and the Indochinese refugees admitted during 1976—many of whom have already experienced considerable difficulty in settling in Australia and who will continue to endure hardship, possibly for many years.

5.4. It is clear to the Committee—from the evidence, from our research and from our direct observations and contact with the refugees themselves—that both the previous and present Governments (together with their various departments) viewed the 1975 and March 1976 admissions of refugees as comprising two distinct and largely unrelated steps, viz.

<sup>1</sup> If the 283 Vietnamese orphans are included, this total increases to 1031 individuals. Additional arrivals of Vietnamese and other refugees are set out in paras 5.8-5.10.

<sup>2</sup> The Committee notes that while a number of additional Vietnamese refugees have since been admitted to Australia, precise statistics are not available for these arrivals.

*Government and official attitudes towards refugees*

their selection and their settlement. As a consequence, the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (formerly the Department of Labor and Immigration) was responsible for the selection of refugees and their entry into Australia,<sup>3</sup> and the Department of Social Security was responsible—at least on paper—for the post-arrival care of migrants and hence for refugees. Indeed, except for a period of two weeks immediately following the refugees' arrival—when Federal and State government bodies joined with the non-government agencies to handle the various health, documentation, social welfare registration and other reception procedures—little on-going contact took place between the central offices of the two departments and their policy/planning sections.

5.5. In the Committee's view this approach was a natural follow-on from the immigration practices of the past. In previous years, and irrespective of whether they were accommodated in migrant hostels or went direct to private accommodation, migrants were left to orientate themselves to, what was in some cases, a new way of life, i.e. to familiarise themselves with and to adjust as best they could to conditions generally; and to learn of the complex of governmental and non-governmental services and facilities at their disposal to assist with their integration into the Australian community.

5.6. In more recent years, and until the 1975 arrivals of refugees occurred, the migrant hostels have come to be regarded simply as a place of temporary accommodation. The rationale behind their use and the objective of those who manage them, appears to have been that of bringing the migrant as quickly as possible to the point where employment can be found by the Commonwealth Employment Service and outside accommodation obtained through the services of a 'Hostel Accommodation Officer'. In other words, to get the individual to move out of the hostel and into the community as quickly as possible.<sup>4</sup> When this occurs, official (i.e. governmental) care and responsibility for the individual's well-being then largely ceases and it becomes the individual's responsibility to seek out from both government and voluntary agencies the social security and welfare services he wants.

5.7. Implicit in this is an attitude concerning the 'status' of the refugees once they have arrived in Australia. Thus, in spite of the special criteria which may have been considered when selecting refugees for entry to Australia—compared with the usual conditions for migrant entry—they are regarded as and treated like normal migrants.

## Arrivals

5.8. During 1975, 524 'hard-core' Vietnamese refugees were brought to Australia by chartered aircraft as part of our program of co-operation with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: 201

<sup>3</sup> The Committee has used the term 'hard-core' refugees in view of its usage by the various government and community organisations who have responsibilities and/or interests in providing welfare assistance, language training, accommodation advice, employment assistance and post-hostel support to the refugees. The term is used throughout the report to denote those refugees who are in extreme circumstances and who require maximum assistance with their settlement.

arrived from Hong Kong on 20 June 1975 and were accommodated in the East Hills Migrant Hostel in Sydney while a further 323 were brought from Singapore and Malaysia on 9 August 1975. These latter groups were housed at the Wacol Migrant Hostel in Brisbane.

5.9. In August 1975, a further group of refugees arrived in Australia, having fled by their own means from Portuguese East Timor to Darwin. By September 1975, this group had swollen to 1355 persons who were accommodated at Cabramatta and Endeavour Hostels in Sydney, and Midway-Phillip and Enterprise Hostels in Melbourne. Some further, smaller groups were accommodated at Pennington Hostel in Adelaide, Greylands Hostel Perth, and Wacol Hostel Brisbane.

5.10. Between 19 and 24 March 1976, a further 568 refugees were brought to Australia by chartered aircraft following the Government's announcement on 21 January 1976 to accept an additional 800 persons mainly from refugee camps in Thailand. This group comprised 279 Laotian, 228 Cambodian refugees and a further 61 Vietnamese; 271 of these disembarked in Melbourne whilst the remaining 297 went to Sydney. The Melbourne refugees went, in the first instance, to the Victorian Health Department Sanatorium at Heatherton where immigration, customs and health procedures were carried out over a period of four days. The refugees were then accommodated at Eastbridge Hostel. The Sydney group were accommodated at Westbridge Hostel.

#### *Reception and hostel intake*

5.11. Each of these refugee intakes was met by departmental officials, interpreters and Commonwealth Hostels personnel together with representatives from voluntary organisations—particularly Red Cross, Life Line and the Society of St Vincent de Paul—who had organised a supply of clothing (suitable for winter conditions in the case of the June and August 1975 arrivals), laundry articles and other personal items. On completion of initial reception procedures, the refugees were assisted by hostel staff to the accommodation that had been prepared for them.

5.12. Following the immediate attention which was given to the refugees' health needs, interviews were conducted by the various Company Hostel Welfare Officers and, in some cases, by social workers from the Department of Social Security to ensure that applications were completed, arrangements made, or information given in respect of such matters as child endowment, medibank, hospital and medical benefit funds, hospital eye examinations and treatment, Primary and High School enrolment, immunisation and additional health matters, and enrolment at English language classes. Representatives of Red Cross, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, local service clubs and other organisations assisted once again in providing transport to hospitals, in meeting the cost of dental and optical treatment and, in some cases, the cost of spectacles required by the refugees.

*Lack of forward planning, co-ordination and other problems relating to reception procedures*

5.13. In the Committee's judgment, reception procedures were handled satisfactorily for each of the groups of refugees and in fact improved with subsequent arrivals. A number of problems did occur, however, and point—in the case of mass arrivals—to the need for effective forward planning and decision-making directed towards the allocation of responsibilities between government and non-government agencies alike, and the co-ordination of the efforts of such bodies—at the earliest possible stage.<sup>6</sup>

5.14. On future occasions, nominal rolls detailing the composition (sex, age and family groupings), destinations (i.e. hostel allocation) and other information about incoming refugees should be provided at the earliest possible time to those involved at the working level of reception. The Committee can appreciate the absence of nominal rolls in the case of the Timorese refugees brought from Darwin to Sydney and Melbourne since they landed in Australia by their own means and without warning. While the lack of basic information on health, family groupings and languages spoken etc., hampered initial preparations for *their* reception, we are concerned that the *same* difficulties were encountered with the planned intake of Thai-based refugees who arrived during 19-24 March 1976. In this most recent intake, nominal rolls arrived in Melbourne on 16 March—only three days prior to the first refugees themselves. Similar difficulties occurred in Sydney and Brisbane with the 1975 intakes of Vietnamese.

5.15. Planning for each of the receptions was thus handicapped by the absence of detailed information until a few days prior to the arrivals of the groups. Much of the critical comment of which the Committee is aware concerning the immediate post-arrival period is a direct reflection of the absence of such detailed information.

5.16. On another plane it became increasingly clear to all who were to be involved at the practical level of reception (or who had been involved in previous receptions), that co-ordination was essential. In Melbourne, for example, the group of government and non-government agencies who were preparing for the reception (and settlement) of the 1976 intake of Indochinese refugees—the 'Victorian Resettlement Co-ordination Committee'—was informed that 'the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs would be the co-ordinating department, but the Department of Social Security would be responsible for co-ordinating the voluntary agencies'. The representatives of the Department of Social Security made it clear, however, that they had minimal staff resources available and that they were particularly keen not to dominate the voluntary agencies. In fact the Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee understands that,

<sup>6</sup> The Committee notes the relevance of these comments to the arrangements made to receive the Vietnamese orphans brought to Australia during April 1975 and refers to the Department of Health's statement that:

'Throughout this activity the Department of Health regarded its principal role as the medical care of evacuees and provision of accommodation at the Quarantine Station. Some difficulty was experienced in carrying out the role of medical care as other departments were also involved and the interests of the different groups were at times in minor conflict.'

(Transcript of Evidence, Vol. 2 1976, p. 935)

although the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs did co-ordinate the health and customs procedures, entry requirements and other immediate reception matters, it was not decided in advance who would assume responsibility for attending to the subsequent needs of the refugees. The question of the longer-term responsibility for settlement was raised also but was not resolved at this stage. In the short-term the Hostel welfare staff were envisaged as important co-ordinating links and it was expected that the Department of Social Security would assist by publishing information sheets and helping in other ways.

5.17. The absence of a formalised structure for co-ordination and complete ignorance as to whether the government would make special provisions for the arrivals, waive any regulations or modify any established procedures, clearly aggravated the practical difficulties which were encountered at the time. As time went on it appeared to all who were involved, that the refugees were expected to fit into the 'system' established for migrants. In the hostel situation this was regarded as important in order to prevent exacerbation of tensions between them and the other residents—many of whom were perceived to have similar difficulties to overcome although they were not officially termed refugees. In spite of these difficulties, the attitude and co-operation of all who were involved at the working levels ensured that the receptions were handled satisfactorily.

#### *Orientation and Settlement Work of Government Agencies*

5.18. The following paragraphs summarise briefly the settlement work which various departments claim to have carried out with the Vietnamese, Timorese and other Indochinese refugees. The material has been compiled from all of the submissions and information made available to the Committee by departments. The resume is given without comment at this stage in order to indicate the overall understanding and, in a number of cases, lack of understanding which various departments had—individually and collectively—at the time.

#### *Social Welfare*

5.19. The Committee was informed that on 10 March 1975, the Department of Social Security had assumed responsibility for the provision of post-arrival social welfare services for migrants, and had created a new Branch within the Social Welfare Division of the Department—the Migrant Community Services Branch—to administer these services. (Prior responsibility for this field had resided with the then Department of Labor and Immigration.) The services provided by the Migrant Community Services Branch are designed to facilitate the settlement of migrants in Australia and 'are available as a matter of course' to refugees who have been admitted to Australia for residence. Newly arrived migrants, including refugees admitted for residence, also are eligible for a wide range of pension benefits and services provided by other branches of the Department of Social Security—either on arrival or following a qualifying period of residence in Australia. In addition, the services which were provided to all migrants in Australia by the Department were available to the refugees

through contact with social workers, welfare officers and the Telephone Interpreter Service.

5.20. The Committee was also informed of the special services which were provided to the Vietnamese refugees. Several Chinese-speaking interpreters were sent to Wacol and East Hills Hostels and Vietnamese-speaking interpreters were engaged for the Telephone Interpreter Service. Two social workers from the Department of Social Security attended the Vietnamese refugees at East Hills Hostel from the outset and worked in close co-operation with the hostel welfare officer and, since May 1976, have continued to make regular visits to Westbridge Hostel in order to maintain close contact with the refugees when they eventually move to private accommodation. We were further informed that the Department had provided assistance in liaison tasks. Links were established with other interested departments, authorities and community organisations. Finally, an information paper on Vietnamese life and family customs was prepared and distributed to persons and organisations helping the refugees in New South Wales.

5.21. The Department of Social Security was also responsible for the financial welfare of the refugees while they continued to depend on the Government for their support. The major source of income for most families was the 'special benefit'<sup>7</sup> which was paid at the same rate as 'unemployment benefit'. As of June 1975, for couples with four children this amounted to \$88.00 per week of which \$49.25 was paid directly to the hostel for board and lodging and the balance, \$38.75 paid to the refugee family.<sup>8</sup> Other benefits available to refugees, depending upon their circumstances, included maternity allowances, child endowment, double orphans pensions, widows pensions, age pensions, invalid pensions, wife's pension, sheltered employment allowances, handicapped allowance, supporting mother's benefit, tuberculosis allowance, Australian Government rehabilitation service and medical benefits.

5.22. The Committee was further informed that the Department of Social Security had recognised the special problems of these people and, within existing limitations, was continuing to provide special counselling

<sup>7</sup> The Committee was informed by the Department of Social Security that a 'special benefit' may be paid to a person ineligible to receive either:

- a pension;
- an unemployment benefit—for which there is normally a twelve month residency qualification or the requirement that the applicant intends to reside permanently in Australia—together with the requirement that the person is willing and able to work and has taken reasonable steps to obtain such work (i.e. has registered for employment with an office of the Commonwealth Employment Service);
- or
- sickness benefit—for which there is also a twelve month qualifying period of residency in Australia or the requirement that the applicant intends to reside permanently in Australia.

In the case of the Vietnamese refugees, 'special benefit' was paid immediately on their arrival in Australia—following formal application to the Department of Social Security and employment registration with the Commonwealth Employment Service. The Committee understands that if suitable work has not been obtained at the end of twelve months' residence, the refugees will then automatically qualify for normal unemployment benefits.

<sup>8</sup> The same family would receive \$98.50 per week at the current (i.e. October 1976) rates—\$57.10 of which is paid directly to the hostel for board and lodging and \$41.40 to the refugee family.

and interpreting facilities for them. At the time of writing to the Committee, similar settlement problems were anticipated among the groups who arrived during March 1976.

### *Employment*

5.23. The Committee was informed that employment assistance to migrants in hostels is given through special employment offices established in the hostels under the control of the Manager of the Office of the Commonwealth Employment Service responsible for the area in which the hostel is located. These offices are staffed to meet the needs of residents at the particular time and when the refugees arrived special staffing arrangements were made to meet their needs.

5.24. In general, considerable difficulty was experienced by the Commonwealth Employment Service in finding employment for the Vietnamese refugees because the majority were unskilled whilst others were in the older age bracket and almost all had little or no facility in the English language. The refugees were further disadvantaged because of their lack of work experience in an industrialised society and the existing labour market situation added to their difficulties in finding suitable employment.

5.25. In Queensland it appeared to the Commonwealth Employment Service that immediately after their arrival most of the refugees were keen to accept work at any level as soon as possible and to learn English at part-time classes in the hostels. Those who claimed to have skills but no documentation to prove such skills, were prepared to take any work on offer and to seek to obtain recognition of their skills at a later date. Within a short time thereafter, many of the Vietnamese refused to accept referrals to vacancies on the ground of their preference to attend full-time English classes. Furthermore, of those who had accepted immediate employment, a number had left their jobs because the work was apparently too heavy and/or they had communication problems, or were dismissed. In a number of cases brought to the Committee's attention, all of this took place within twelve days from their arrival at the hostel. In addition, when those who had finished their English language courses became available for employment, the job market had become such that employment was extremely scarce.

5.26. Although the occupational standard of the March 1976 intake of refugees was much higher than in the 1975 groups,<sup>9</sup> the Commonwealth Employment Service informed the Committee that they anticipated difficulties in finding suitable employment for many of these refugees. Once again, they were required to compete for a limited number of opportunities with a large number of similarly experienced people from the Australian workforce who were unemployed. Accordingly, it was expected that many would face the prospect of having to accept semi-skilled or unskilled work in order to obtain initial employment.

<sup>9</sup> Since they were selected on different criteria; see p. 35 para. 3.33.

5.27. The Committee was informed that arrangements had been made for both children and adults in the refugee groups to receive language instruction under the migrant education program for which the Minister for Education is responsible under the *Immigration (Education) Act* 1971-1973. By arrangement with the Migrant Education Branches of the State Education Departments, adult language courses were established at East Hills and Wacol Hostels where three classes provided instruction in two, three and four-hour sessions daily. For adults with professional backgrounds and tertiary-level students, full time accelerated English language courses were arranged outside the hostels for six hours daily over a period of ten weeks.

5.28. Primary and secondary school children were placed in local schools adjacent to the hostels while the hostels' child minding centres (for children between 2 and 5 years of age) and their baby-watching service (for those under 2 years) provided mothers with an opportunity to attend language classes or, for those with 2 to 5-year-olds, commence work. Where the mother did attend language classes, the cost of these services was met by the Department of Education.

5.29. At the time of preparing its submission (in July 1975) the Department informed the Committee that the qualifications of the refugees wishing to continue tertiary studies had been assessed and the students were guided in applying for enrolment in tertiary institutions for the 1976 academic year. Those successful in enrolment, would be eligible for assistance under the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme. In the meantime the students would attend English classes at the education centre in the hostel and those who had been placed in employment would attend evening classes. On completion of the assessment of qualifications special preparatory language instruction at the intensive level would be provided to the tertiary group through the facilities available at the State Offices of the Department. On 30 April 1976, the Committee was informed that officers of the Department had ' . . . conducted interviews at length, assisted in approaches to the Committee on Overseas Qualifications, personally approached the tertiary institutions to support applications for entry and generally provided every assistance that was possible. In view of the autonomy of tertiary institutions, the final decision on actual enrolment was of course a matter for them'.

5.30. Finally, the Committee was informed that employment, old age, illness and reasonable fluency in English in the case of several individuals, accounted for a number of refugees not attending either day or evening classes. Those who had not enrolled were encouraged to join classes when circumstances permitted.

*Summary*

5.31. To recapitulate briefly, the Committee was informed that, in the case of the Sydney and Brisbane groups, a number of the large family groups with low income capacity faced great difficulties in affording private accommodation and were therefore unlikely to move out of the hostel



for a considerable time. As refugees, the great majority of these people arrived without financial or material resources; their difficulties were exacerbated in many cases by additional circumstances such as families without bread winners, rurally-oriented subsistence backgrounds, and a lack of relevant occupational skills. It was expected that a reasonably high incidence of health and settlement problems would be encountered amongst these groups, as those who arrived in Australia in July and August 1975 were selected for admission on the basis that they appeared least likely to be offered resettlement in other countries and most in need of the humanitarian assistance which entry to Australia would provide. The main problems were thought to lie in the fields of housing and employment.

#### *Orientation and Settlement Work of the Local 'Settlement Committees'*<sup>10</sup>

5.32. Although humanitarian concern was shown by the Government in accepting refugees into Australia who were most in need of assistance, the Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee regrets that at no time did the Government have an overall 'resettlement scheme' to cater for the special settlement needs of these people. The refugees were in fact treated like other migrants. At the practical level and particularly within the hostels, the welfare officers who were responsible for the day-to-day care and well-being of the refugees, gradually evolved various methods to cope with their needs. Trial and error played a significant part in this process of learning how to cope with refugees from Asia.

5.33. It became apparent from our own observations, as indeed it soon became apparent to those who were working with the refugees on a daily face-to-face basis, that many of their problems were far greater and more complicated than those met by the normal migrant. This point was generally not appreciated, however, by many officials at the middle and senior levels of the Departments of Social Security and Education, the Commonwealth Employment Service and Commonwealth Hostels Limited. Nevertheless, as a result of the initiatives of hostel welfare officers, a number of settlement committees were created in New South Wales, and later in Queensland to make a concerted and practical attempt to settle the Vietnamese, Timorese and Indochinese refugees into the community.<sup>11</sup> In the Committee's view, most of the real settlement work was and is still being achieved by these ad hoc committees with their large representation of voluntary agencies having practical interests and expertise in the field of settlement.

<sup>10</sup> Although the local and mainly hostel-based settlement committees are currently referred to as 'resettlement committees', the Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee believes this is an inappropriate and misleading title and recommends that in future they be known and referred to as 'settlement committees'. (This latter title has therefore been used throughout the report.)

<sup>11</sup> The settlement committee which was subsequently established in Victoria is considered later in this chapter.

5.34. In the paragraphs which follow—and in contrast to the information which has been provided to the Committee by government departments concerning their roles in the work of settlement—consideration is given to the work of these mainly hostel-based settlement committees, the problems which they encountered and the methods employed to resolve them. The Committee's comments concerning the problems of the refugees which have yet to be faced realistically follow, together with our comments on the process of resettlement itself.

*Development of  
orientation  
programs*

5.35. It is clear to the Committee that a program of orientation activities for the refugees was first initiated in New South Wales by the staff of Commonwealth Hostels Limited as they faced the practical problems of coping with the refugees' needs. At East Hills Hostel a program of fortnightly meetings was arranged to inform the refugees of the conditions which they could expect to experience in commencing new lives in Australia. Guest speakers were invited from a number of State and Federal government departments to talk informally with an average attendance of 40 Vietnamese heads of families. These 'orientation meetings' commenced on 5 September 1975 and were conducted on a fortnightly basis for two months and then on a more irregular and 'as-required' basis until 1 May 1976 when the hostel was closed and the remaining Vietnamese residents were transferred to Westbridge Hostel.

5.36. The topics which were covered in discussion with the refugees included such matters as general health care and hygiene; baby care and dietary needs, responsibility of parent to child; availability of health services; dental care including school dental service; English language courses, education and transport to schools; availability of family counselling services; the postal system; reunification of families, sponsorship and the Red Cross tracing service; accommodation offers, housing and furnishings, the payment of bonds, deposits and rents; the role of charitable organisations, community support and referral services; the formation of clubs and associations; and, employment conditions such as award-payments, workers' compensation, notification of accident or sickness, holiday entitlements and the unions and their role in society. In practice the 'program' was devised by a small group of persons who had become involved with the refugees' care and well-being. It included representatives from Commonwealth Hostels Limited, the Anglican Immigration Office and the Department of Social Security, together with a grant-in-aid social worker from the Society of St Vincent de Paul, a social worker/research-assistant from the inquiry being conducted by Dr J. Martin and an interpreter.

5.37. With the transfer to Westbridge Hostel of those Vietnamese who had yet to make a move out into the community it became obvious to the 'organising group' that a more organised and adventurous scheme was required to tackle the settlement problems of those refugees who were accommodated at Westbridge Hostel. As of 1 May 1976 this comprised 51

accommodated at Westbridge Hostel. As of 1 May 1976 this comprised 51 Vietnamese, 265 Indochinese refugees brought from camps in Thailand and 321 refugees from East Timor. Accordingly, assistance was sought from various government and voluntary welfare organisations. Their representatives met on 5 May 1976 and formed a 'settlement committee'—having been 'born' as it were, as a consequence of nine months of practical experience with Asian refugees. This committee grew in membership to 15 representatives from voluntary organisations and government departments and agencies such as the Anglican Immigration Office, the Committee of National Concern for Indochinese Refugees, Returned Services League, Red Cross, Australian Council of Churches, Good Neighbour Council, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, the Migrant Community Services Branch of the Department of Social Security, the Commonwealth Employment Service, Department of Youth Ethnic and Community Affairs together with welfare and housing accommodation officers from Commonwealth Hostels Limited.

5.38. Since its inception this committee has met on a monthly basis with a view to achieving the following objectives:

- the promotion and encouragement of community support for involvement with the refugees (particularly outside the hostel);
- the opening up of lines of communication and information between voluntary and governmental organisations, the refugees and the community at large (as a means of reducing the duplication of effort and confusion which it causes to individuals);
- to act as a bridge between the refugees and community groups outside the hostel;
- to assist with the provision of essential counselling and welfare support services—with particular emphasis on post-hostel follow-up visits for the problem families;
- to prevent possible exploitation of the refugees—who were judged to be 'at risk'—when they leave the protective hostel environment; and
- to promote the development of, and the refugees' involvement in, national associations (i.e. to foster a sense of identity amongst the refugees).

In the Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee's view, the overall aim of this committee has been to tap and to mobilise the community resources which are available to assist with the settlement of the refugees, i.e. to act as a catalyst with the co-ordinating function foremost.

5.39. In Queensland the Department of Social Security appeared to have assumed overall responsibility for the refugees' settlement from the outset. Using interpreters, two departmental social workers were provided on a full-time basis at Wacol Hostel during the initial two weeks and, with the assistance of a grant-in-aid social worker, obtained basic information from each family and provided immediate assistance to them. In essence this team attended to basic reception tasks. However, this support tapered thereafter. In the eight weeks that followed one departmental social

worker (with part-time assistance from interpreters and two additional social workers) arranged counselling sessions with groups of 10-15 refugees. In contrast to the orientation methods used in New South Wales, topics such as home and child care, housing, hire purchase, shopping, taxation and other aspects of community life in Australia were covered by one social worker in 7 two-hour sessions per week. Ten weeks after the arrival of the Vietnamese, the support rendered by the social worker was reduced to two or three visits to the hostel per week. Clearly the question of providing post-hostel support had not been recognised in Brisbane to the same extent as had occurred in Sydney. Moreover the question of who was to accept overall responsibility for the longer-term tasks of assisting the refugees to settle and establish themselves in the community had yet to be asked.

5.40. As of 8 December 1975, of the original 323 Vietnamese residents, 38 had moved out of the hostel leaving 285 refugees still to be settled. In practical terms little had been achieved in these first five months.

5.41. As a consequence of the delays in decision-making, the lack of co-ordination and, most importantly the lack of practical achievements, the co-ordinating welfare officer of Commonwealth Hostels Limited took the initiative in Brisbane during December 1975. Accordingly a series of orientation evenings were arranged along similar lines to those which had been conducted in the New South Wales hostels. In the light of experience gained with settlement work in Sydney, a small settlement committee was also convened at the hostel in January 1976. Membership of this committee comprised the accommodation and welfare officer at Wacol Hostel; an irrigation and water supply technical officer from the Society of St Vincent de Paul; two representatives from a community service organisation, Jaycees; a farmer; a social worker from the Department of Social Security; a representative of the Commonwealth Employment Service; and the local member of Parliament, the Member for Bowman.

5.42. The principle objective in establishing this committee was to provide some form of practical assistance to the Vietnamese in settling in the community. Because of the farming background of many of the Vietnamese remaining at Wacol Hostel, much of the settlement committee's effort was taken-up in considering and co-ordinating the refugee's preferences for accommodation and agricultural employment with the various offers of rural settlement which had been received from within the community. In the Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee's view, and unfortunately for the Vietnamese, this settlement committee has been far less effective than those established in New South Wales. Its effectiveness has not been helped by a general apathy, on the part of employment officers and social security officials, towards rural employment as a possible avenue to the solution of the settlement problems of many of the Vietnamese refugees at Wacol (a matter which is considered in detail at page 67 of the report).

5.43. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the Brisbane refugees, who in many ways faced the greatest difficulties, should have been disadvantaged by these circumstances which were not of their own making. In the context of these remarks we note from the Department of Social Security's reply (received on 16 July 1976) that they have 'recognised that this group of refugees lack material resources and have special problems which will require support and assistance from voluntary agencies and other organisations on a long term basis before full settlement can be said to have occurred'. Given the lack of departmental resources, however, and the limited funds which are available to voluntary agencies, the Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee cannot see this type of support eventuating unless special arrangements are made by the Government.

5.44. In Victoria a co-ordinating committee was established from the outset to plan and provide for the needs of the 271 Laotian, Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees who arrived in Melbourne on 19 March and 23 March 1976. Ironically little or nothing of a practical nature has been achieved in the six months to August 1976 by the two committees, five sub-committees and six task-forces which have been created. The organisations which are represented on these bodies comprise four Commonwealth Government departments, five State Government departments, twenty-two voluntary welfare organisations and six Ethnic groups. It is little wonder, therefore, that these various committees are oversighted by a co-ordinating committee, the 'Victorian Resettlement Co-ordinating Committee'. Of the 271 refugees brought to Melbourne, 60 had moved from the hostel into private accommodation as of the middle of August 1976; to that time no program of orientation activities had commenced with the refugees and it appears that more effort has been expended by the Department of Social Security in servicing and co-ordinating these various bodies than in providing for the real needs of the refugees themselves.

5.45. It is significant to note that both of the submissions prepared by the Department of Social Security omitted to mention either an orientation 'program' (or individual orientation activities) being conducted with the refugees, or the 'settlement committees' which had been set up in each of the States. (The first submission was received on 12 September 1975—nearly three months after the first arrivals on 20 June 1975; and the second, on 12 April 1976—some 9-10 months after the initial refugee intake). In fact, the Committee did not obtain any information from the Department of Social Security concerning these matters until 16 July 1976, when a reply was received to the Committee's specific request of 8 June for information on them.

5.46. The Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee concludes, therefore, that the results which were achieved in settling the Vietnamese refugees were largely due to the energy and enthusiasm of individual members who made up the settlement committees rather than to the

efforts of government departments. Indeed in our estimate, these settlement committees were provided with little more than minimal departmental support and backing. While a great deal of departmental assistance was provided in attending to the initial reception procedures, this help was then largely withdrawn because of departmental staffing problems and other preoccupations.

5.47. In the context of these comments, the Committee pays tribute to the efforts of the voluntary agencies in each of the States and especially to the Society of St Vincent de Paul whose social workers have been particularly active in their post-hostel follow up work with the refugees.

*Settlement Problems—Areas where Action is Most Needed*

5.48. From the foregoing, it is clear that a great deal of effort has been expended for the benefit of the Vietnamese and other refugees in assisting them to settle in Australia. Unfortunately, many of the real problems of the refugees have yet to be tackled by the Government or indeed recognised by officials within the decision-taking and policy-making levels of departments responsible for their care.

5.49. In the paragraphs which follow the Committee has set out the problems which it believes have not been resolved or only partly resolved. Much of the information has been obtained from the refugees themselves and from discussions with individuals having day-to-day contact with the refugees and responsibilities for attending to their needs. Particular efforts were made to identify the *special needs* of the refugees and, in view of their vastly different cultural background, care was taken by the Committee to obtain the services of an appropriate interpreter.

5.50. In order to communicate effectively with the Vietnamese—something which has been achieved by hardly any groups (government and non-government alike) which have had contact with and responsibility for the refugees—we sought and obtained the services of a person who had lived and raised his family in Vietnam, who had absorbed much of the culture, attitudes and value system of the Vietnamese, who was fluent in the dialects of both North and South Vietnam and who, in his own right, was a Vietnamese linguist of international standing and an authority on the teaching of the language. Whilst the Committee was indeed fortunate to obtain the services of such a person, and whilst we note that persons with similar backgrounds are limited in numbers, we cannot fail to reach the conclusion that, in the case of government departments with their vast resources, no such attempt was made to obtain suitable interpreters. Indeed, we conclude that the limited communication which has taken place between the refugees and various departmental and other officials, has been achieved on an *ad hoc* basis making use of any interpreter or interpreting service which happened to be available at the time of need, regardless of the interpreter's expertise or knowledge in the area required. Unfortunately this has been particularly evident in the case of, but not confined to, Commonwealth Hostels Limited. As an illustration of one

such *ad hoc* arrangement made in New South Wales, the Commonwealth Employment Service employed a Laotian interpreter who spoke Vietnamese. In view of the long history of racial antagonism between the Vietnamese and Laotian peoples, this was indeed an unfortunate choice of interpreter and one which must have reduced the effectiveness of officers of the Employment Service.

5.51. In our view these types of problems accounted in large part for the lack of detailed knowledge of the Vietnamese and concern for their problems as refugees.

*Language problems  
and prospects of  
employment*

5.52. It is apparent to the Committee that the problems experienced by the Vietnamese have stemmed fundamentally from two conflicting sets of pressures, the need to learn English on the one hand and pressure to take jobs on the other.

5.53. At the outset the Committee disagrees with the philosophy adopted by the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations and the Commonwealth Employment Service. That philosophy gave rise to the situation where the Department made every endeavour to absorb the refugees into the workforce as quickly as possible. It explains in part, the insufficient emphasis which has been given to the teaching of English to the refugees, the dissatisfaction experienced by most refugees with their present employment and the fact that considerable numbers have either left their employment or been sacked—because of language and other problems—and have re-registered with offices of the Commonwealth Employment Service for employment.<sup>12</sup> It accounts also for the differences of opinion between Education authorities and the Commonwealth Employment Service—particularly at Wacol Hostel—concerning the priority to be given to learning the language on the one hand and the need to find employment on the other, and gave rise to the stop/go, full-time/part-time participation in language classes.

5.54. In practical terms, some of the refugees succumbed to the pressures placed on them to commence work first and then to 'pick-up' the language by attending night classes. These pressures stemmed from a fear that their 'special benefit' payments would be terminated if they failed to accept labouring or factory work which was offered; and the reminder notices from Commonwealth Hostel Managers concerning the length of their residency—with their implication that, as they had reached the ten-month point, for example, only two months remained before the usual period of residency expired. Clearly they had to be economically self-sufficient before leaving the hostel at the completion of their twelve months entitlement period. In the Committee's view, these pressures were magnified by the refugees' desire to establish homes for their families as quickly as they could.

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<sup>12</sup> The Committee is aware, for example, of 10 Vietnamese individuals who re-registered (on 27 July 1976) with the Bankstown CES office in Sydney.

5.55. As far as the Committee was able to ascertain, prior to the arrival of the Vietnamese, no steps were able to be taken by the Commonwealth Employment Service to identify and resolve potential employment problems. In fact, we believe that very little was done to stimulate employer interest in the Vietnamese as the Department had no information which gave any insight into their skills and experience, employment background, their ability to speak English, their knowledge of Australian customs and culture, their familiarity with industries, etc. This was partly due to the fact that the nominal rolls were received only a day or two prior to the refugee's actual arrival and, in the case of the New South Wales arrivals, because information relating to their occupations was not included. (Indeed the little information which was contained proved inaccurate and of little value and it was not until the Hostel Employment Office Staff were able to register all of the breadwinners that potential problems could be identified.)

5.56. In addition we do not believe that those Vietnamese who have moved from the hostel out into the workforce and community at large can be said to have been permanently settled. In reality many of their problems have simply become hidden from view. From the cases which we were able to document, most are unhappy with their present employment which suits neither their skills, their previous training or their inclinations. These people will undoubtedly require continuing assistance to find appropriate work in the near future. Rather than tending to view the objective as one of finding once-and-for-all placements as quickly as possible, we believe the task should be regarded as one of on-going contact and assistance to the refugees in their progression towards positions regarded as appropriate.

*Inadequate  
emphasis on  
language training*

5.57. It is clear to the Committee that insufficient importance has been attached to language training for the Vietnamese and other refugees. The courses which have been provided within the hostels have been far too short to be effective and have suffered in the main from their part-time, after-hours nature. The present requirement that an individual must be available for work (and accept suitable employment when offered to him) in order to receive the payment of 'special benefit' (i.e. an unemployment cheque) has prevented individuals from having access to full-time courses. Fatigue on the part of the refugees coupled with the fact that evening English classes compete with other life-demands for the limited time available once people start working, also had its toll in declining attendances and has reduced the effectiveness of language training. We note also that the teaching materials which are currently provided by the Commonwealth Department of Education (the 'Situational English' series) were prepared mainly for people of European background and are not entirely suitable for use with Asians without adaptation by the teacher to suit their special circumstances. Whether or not this has in fact occurred, the Committee is unable to judge. We are of the opinion, however, that the refugees' present facility in the language is generally poor and note the



conclusion reached (ironically) by the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations that 'the low standard of English achieved by refugees attending both part-time hostel classes or full-time courses has prevented them from being accepted for other training courses'.

5.58. With regard to the 10-week full-time accelerated language course which was provided to those refugees having some tertiary training and/or professional qualifications, we note that this has not generally provided a 'bridge' between their former professions and comparable ones here in Australia. In fact many of those who completed the course in Queensland have been unable to gain entrance to a tertiary institution in order either to upgrade their existing training or to further their studies. In some instances a poor command of the English language appears to have been the stumbling block, whilst in others, a lack of documentary evidence has prevented their admission to the institution concerned. We suspect that similar situations have occurred in other States and note that the Department of Education was unable to support a request for the attendance of a number of New South Wales refugees at the full-time Day Matriculation Course during 1976. Similarly, a proposal to provide an advanced language course at the English Preparation Centre for a number of refugees—to bring their standard of English up to the level required for university study—was not approved.

5.59. In the context of these findings, the Committee is most concerned about the information given (in Vietnamese) to the refugees in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia prior to embarking for Australia.<sup>13</sup> Under the heading 'Education—Recognition of Diplomas', the refugees were informed that 'most diplomas issued outside Australia are not usually recognised straight away here. This is very important for those who are doctors or dentists or other professional people, e.g. plumbers or electricians.' They were further informed that 'for those who want to study a profession, there is a special university system', and that 'there are technical colleges to train those children who want to learn a trade'.

5.60. In reality the refugees have secured very few places at any of these educational institutions. Given the autonomy of tertiary institutions and the fact that the decision on enrolment is theirs, we are puzzled as to the inclusion of the comments which were made in the document provided to the refugees. Unfortunately, the situation facing those refugees with tertiary training and/or professional backgrounds looks very bleak in the short-term, for in the absence of documents with which to substantiate

<sup>13</sup> The handwritten document entitled '*Brief Points for Vietnamese Refugees coming to Australia*' is reproduced at Appendix 1, p. 103 together with an English translation which was prepared for the Committee.

The Committee understands that the document was prepared in English within the Department of Labor and Immigration and vetted within the then Prime Minister's Office. The Vietnamese translation was prepared by the two Australian interpreters who joined the Australian selection teams in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia and was provided to those refugees who had been selected for settlement in Australia.