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8 August 2014

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Welfare Review

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Submission to the Reference Group on Welfare Reform with respect to its interim report to the Minister for Social Services, "A New System for Better Employment and Social Outcomes"

The Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture (Foundation House) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the Interim Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform to the Minister for Social Services.

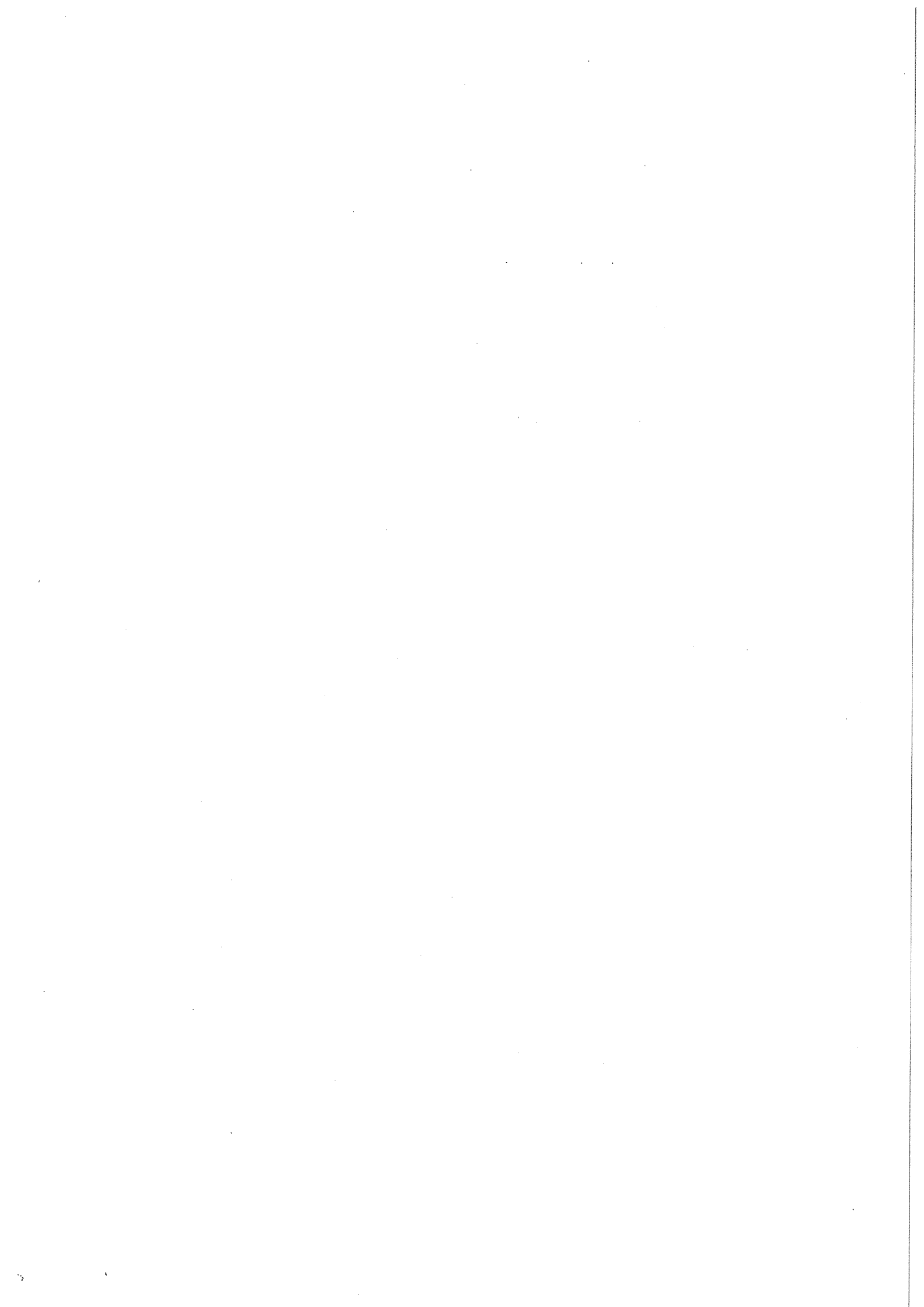
This submission is concerned in particular with the circumstances and needs of people of refugee backgrounds, the cohort of the Australian population with whom we work. Since its establishment in 1987, Foundation House has provided counselling and other forms of assistance to thousands of people from diverse origins who were subjected to torture or other traumatic events in their countries of origin or while fleeing those countries.

In the preparation of the submission, Foundation House had the benefit of discussing the Interim Report with other agencies providing submissions, including the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Refugee Council of Australia, who have a wealth of detailed knowledge about issues affecting people of

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refugee backgrounds and policies, programs and services which can promote effective settlement outcomes.

General comments

The Reference Group on Welfare Reform identifies that "some migrants, especially refugees, may...face serious challenges to participating in work, and generally require a high degree of government support and assistance over a prolonged period." (page 36).

It is important to put this into perspective. As a recent major study of the economic, social and civic contributions of first and second generation humanitarian entrants concluded, "(t)here are difficulties which most humanitarian settlers experience in the early years of settlement but most are able to adjust effectively and converge toward the Australian average levels of economic and social contribution."¹

The central thrust of our submission is that whatever package of measures the Reference Group ultimately proposes, it will be critical to have regard to the circumstances and needs of groups of people who experience particular complex issues and barriers. People of refugee backgrounds are one such group. Otherwise, many vulnerable individuals will experience serious adverse outcomes, the reforms will not achieve their objectives and public funds will be wasted.

Foundation House and other agencies working with people of refugee backgrounds and asylum seekers have for many years advised and worked collaboratively with the Australian government and state, territory and local government to promote the accessibility and responsiveness of programs and services to these populations.

The Reference Group on Welfare Reform recognises the important contribution of civil society within Pillar Four: Building Community Capacity. We believe it has critical contributions to make with respect to the other pillars of reform as well, advising Government and agencies about what works and what doesn't as well as implementing innovative projects to meet the needs of particular groups who may not be well served by 'mainstream' programs.

For reasons of conciseness we speak in general terms about issues affecting people of refugee backgrounds. We are however mindful that people of refugee backgrounds are heterogeneous in aspects that are significant for the programs and services within the mandate of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform, such as English language ability, education background, exposure to violence and other hardships prior to arrival in Australia, physical and mental health, family and community presence and support. Their diversity underscores the importance of policy responses having the capacity to respond in a tailored, flexible manner.

The submission focuses on issues relating to people who have been granted permanent or temporary Humanitarian Program visas. We also have strong

concerns relating to the welfare of asylum seekers, in particular those who arrived without valid visas, which appear to lie outside the scope of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform and we have taken these up and will continue to do so through other fora.

In the following sections the submission examines several areas identified in the Interim Report with respect to which we consider that specific attention should be paid to the circumstances and needs of people of refugee backgrounds in the design and delivery of programs and services.

Employment services

The Interim Report mentions a number of complex barriers to employment faced by job seekers, several of which may be particularly pertinent to people of refugee backgrounds – limited work experience (certainly in Australia); limited English ability and life histories of trauma or social disadvantage. (98).

A large number of people of refugee backgrounds may also encounter significant difficulties finding and retaining employment when (in accordance with Government policy) they are granted only short-term rather than permanent protection visas, as was the experience of people who were granted Temporary Protection Visas during 1999-2007.ⁱⁱ

As stated above, the evidence indicates that while many humanitarian entrants experience significant difficulties finding and retaining employment, with increased length of residence in Australia their participation rates improve and converge towards those born in Australia.ⁱⁱⁱ Further, “appropriate policy and program intervention can significantly enhance workforce participation rates among humanitarian settlers, even in the earliest years of settlement in Australia. Much has been learned about the types of interaction which are most effective in enhancing workforce participation.”^{iv}

The Interim Report advises that a redesign of employment services is being undertaken and that stakeholders want it to focus on “meeting employers’ and job seekers’ needs to achieve truly sustainable employment outcomes, rather than focusing on service process or administrative transactions.” (98-99) This is welcome with respect to people of refugee backgrounds (and no doubt other groups with particular needs) as there have been recurrent concerns expressed that current arrangements are not adequately targeted and flexible to respond effectively to distinct issues affecting this cohort.^v

Education and training

The Reference Group on Welfare Reform seeks views about measures that might be taken to improve access to literacy, numeracy and job relevant training for young people at risk of unemployment (87-89).

This is an area of key concern to young people of refugee background, their families and agencies providing assistance to them. The following is a summary of key points from our experience and other agencies, data and the findings of research:^{vi}

- A significant proportion (in the order of 20% plus) of refugee and other humanitarian entrants to Australia in recent years were aged 15-24;
- many of these young people demonstrate strong motivation to pursue education, training and career goals;
- despite high aspirations and expectations, there are high levels of school dropout and unemployment; and
- the major barriers to educational and employment participation include past experiences of trauma and dislocation; disrupted schooling; limited English proficiency; lack of knowledge of the Australian education system and labour market; absence of networks that can facilitate finding employment; and racism.

There is a body of knowledge about “what works” based on research, consultation with young people and service providers, and evaluation of initiatives. An instance of a project that has demonstrated positive outcomes for young people of refugee backgrounds is UCan2, developed by Foundation House, the Centre for Multicultural Youth and AMES. Under UCan2, in partnership with their English language provider, young participants are provided with an integrated program of educational case management, psycho-social support, mentoring and training and employment opportunities.

Improving data and evaluation

We welcome that the Interim Report recognizes the importance of “(i)mproving data collection nationally, together with evaluation of services, (to) assist in designing effective services for disadvantaged groups and targeting those services to those most in need.” (32)

That data is crucial to the identification of need and assessment of whether remedial programs are effective is very apparent with respect to the intergovernmental commitment and partnership to “Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage.” (116-117)

There has been acknowledgement for some time that data collection and analysis with respect to migrants from a non-English speaking background generally and those of a refugee background in particular should be improved at all levels of government in Australia.

The significance of inadequacies in the collection and analysis of data may be illustrated by two instances:

- the Productivity Commission's 2013 report *Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia* referred to in the Interim Report (108) cites data which indicates that while migrants from a non-English speaking background were more likely than the average Australian to experience relative income poverty, "the prevalence rates of deep and persistent social exclusion...is similar to the average for all Australians." (84) However the latter conclusion is subject to a very significant caveat: "given the small sample of migrants and refugees in the (survey that is the basis for the data), any results need to be interpreted with caution." (84)
- Data from school student testing under the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is disaggregated to show the performance of students categorized as Language Background Other than English (LBOTE). The data indicates that LBOTE students outperform English speaking students on most test domains. Evidence indicates that LBOTE students are heterogeneous and vary significantly in their results – data for this category does not indicate outcomes for groups who may be disadvantaged educationally such as refugees. As a consequence (according to one researcher) "the LBOTE category, in its current form, provides little policy information, and at a national level, may even work against recognition of language need, unless direct attention is given to variation, rather than normal (average) performance."^{vii}

We welcome that the Commonwealth Government and its agencies have put in place initiatives to improve data collection and analysis, for example by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.^{viii} As well, the Department of Social Services has commissioned *Building a New Life in Australia*, a longitudinal study of Humanitarian Migrants to assemble evidence about what helps successful settlement of humanitarian migrants and assists in improving program delivery and policies.

We are mindful however that a number of previous endeavors to improve data have not been sustained. We therefore consider that it would be helpful for the Reference Group on Welfare Reform to reiterate in its final report the critical importance of improving the collection and analysis of data, disseminating the evidence to service providers and supporting robust and ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

ⁱ Graeme Hugo et al, *Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants*, Final Report to Department of Immigration and Citizenship, May 2011, pages 262-263.

ⁱⁱ It is the policy of the Australian Government to grant only temporary visas, not permanent visas, to people who arrive without valid visas and are found to engage Australia's protection

obligations as refugees or on other humanitarian grounds. At the time of writing our understanding is that only a relatively small number of people have been granted these visas.

ⁱⁱⁱ Graeme Hugo et al, *Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants*, Final Report to Department of Immigration and Citizenship, May 2011, page 252.

^{iv} Graeme Hugo et al, *Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants*, Final Report to Department of Immigration and Citizenship, May 2011, page 252.

^v Refugee Council of Australia, *Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program 2014-15, Community views on current challenges and future directions*, February 2014, page 77.

^{vi} Centre for Multicultural Youth et al, *Facilitating the Transition to Employment for Refugee Young People*, 2014 – www.cmy.net.au

^{vii} Susan Creagh, 'Language Background Other Than English': a problem NAPLAN test category for Australian students of refugee background, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 2013.

^{viii} Australian Bureau of Statistics Agency Multi-Cultural Plan 2013-15.

