



Submission from the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma about Australia's 2025-26 Humanitarian Program

August 2025

The Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT) welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to assist the Department of Home Affairs and inform Australia's 2025-26 Humanitarian Program.

FASSTT is a network of Australia's eight specialist rehabilitation agencies that work with survivors of torture and other trauma who have come to Australia from overseas. Most clients of FASSTT agencies have come to Australia as refugees or humanitarian entrants, including many who arrive as part of Australia's Humanitarian Program. FASSTT agencies also work with survivors of torture and other trauma who have come to Australia as asylum seekers. There is a FASSTT member agency in each state and territory of Australia.¹

FASSTT agencies collectively work with approximately 21,000 clients each year who have been tortured or survived highly traumatic experiences before their arrival. People arriving through Australia's Humanitarian Program are eligible for FASSTT services through the Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma (PASTT) which is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. We note that this year marks 30 years of operation for the Program of Assistance for Survivors of Torture and Trauma and we commend the Australian Government for its continued support of the program and the recognition of the important role that specialist trauma services have in assisting and supporting torture and other trauma survivors to ensure successful settlement outcomes. In 2022, the QUT Australian Centre for Health Services Innovation completed an evaluation of PASTT, and a finding of the review was that "of the 277,539 humanitarian entrants to Australia over the last 20 years, at least 46% have been enrolled in individual counselling services via PASTT at some point since settlement".²

FASSTT agencies seek to combat the impact of torture and other trauma on the individual, the family, and the community by conducting psychosocial assessments; providing counselling and advocacy; delivering group-based healing; training and building the capacity of other service providers; conducting research; and facilitating community development.

¹ See *Appendix 1* for full list of FASSTT agencies

² Australian Centre for Health Services Innovation, Evaluation of the Program of Assistance for Survivors of Torture and Trauma, Final Report, June 2022.

This submission from FASSTT is informed by the specialist expertise, knowledge and experience of our member agencies accumulated through our work with a diverse cohort of individual and community of survivors. In our submission, FASSTT raises the following five key calls for action in relation to Australia's 2025-26 Humanitarian Program:

- A. Prioritise vulnerable and trauma-affected cohorts
- B. Reduce excessive wait times for family reunion
- C. Increase intake of Humanitarian Program
- D. Strengthen settlement program/services and capacity to provide psychosocial support
- E. Develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with humanitarian crises

A. Prioritise vulnerable and trauma-affected cohorts

FASSTT endorses the continued prioritisation of “vulnerable cohorts within refugee populations” as a guiding principle of Australia's Humanitarian Program, which currently includes a “focus on people who are outside of their home country” and is inclusive of women and children, LGBTQI+ and other identified minority groups.³

FASSTT proposes that the Australian Government consider the inclusion of other vulnerable cohorts for prioritisation in the Humanitarian Program, with particular consideration given to the inclusion of trauma-affected cohorts as a highly vulnerable cohort. Trauma-affected cohorts include people who are suffering from severe mental distress and ill-health arising from their experience of violence and torture, exacerbated by their protracted refugee situations because of persecution, conflict or war and long-term displacement. Additionally, prioritisation and expeditious processing should be provided to people with greatest exposure and proximity to risk, such as people with high psychosocial vulnerability or health risk, stateless people, people living in protracted displacement, and displaced people facing immediate danger (including people who are forcibly or coerced to return to their country of origin e.g. people forced to return to Afghanistan^{4 5}).

As noted in the Discussion Paper, Australia's Humanitarian Program is under unprecedented demand because of a shifting global humanitarian environment, impacted by geopolitical unrest and multiple international crises, and cuts or suspensions to humanitarian and other aid programs. UNHCR reports that an estimated 2.5 million refugees worldwide will need to be resettled in 2026, with Afghans representing the largest population in need of resettlement, along with South Sudanese, Sudanese, Rohingya and Congolese (DRC) refugees.⁶ The Australian

³ Department of Home Affairs, Discussion Paper – Australia's Humanitarian Program 2025-26, pg. 2.

⁴ UN News, 'UNHCR urges Pakistan to stop forced returns of Afghan refugees', 5 August 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165572>

⁵ ABC News, 'More than a million Afghans forced back from Iran face poverty and uncertain future', 2 August 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-02/million-afghans-forced-back-from-iran-un-warns-of-crisis/105600158>

⁶ UNHCR, 2026 Projected Global Resettlement Needs (PGRN), <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/2026-projected-global-resettlement-needs-pgrn>

Government should consider inclusion of these refugee populations for the composition of the 2025-26 Humanitarian Program.

B. Reduce excessive wait times for family reunion

The collective experience of FASSTT agencies has clearly demonstrated that family reunion is of critical importance for the psychological well-being of our clients and to achieving successful settlement outcomes. Consequently, there is a need for the Australian Government to enact measures that will reduce excessive wait times for family reunion and increase capacity and accessibility of family reunion options within the Humanitarian Program or through complementary pathways and family streams in the Australian Migration Program.

*“Family unity is a fundamental human right. Respect for the right to family unity and family life **requires States to refrain from actions resulting in family separation and to ensure the reunification of separated families in the least possible delay.**”⁷*

For FASSTT clients, concern about family members in danger or potential danger in the country of origin or asylum, or in refugee camps, is a significant stressor for them, and can inhibit recovery from trauma-related symptoms and effective settlement. Prolonged delays in the processing of applications for family reunion, often without the provision of a reason causes uncertainty, and contributes to adverse mental health consequences such as depression and anxiety. This waiting period has the effect of placing people in a ‘holding pattern’ and at best causes stagnation – and at worst, regression – in the therapeutic process, which also impacts upon their progress and functional ability to settle and integrate into Australian society.

C. Increase intake of Humanitarian Program

FASSTT commends the Australian Government for its ongoing commitment for the Humanitarian Program and acknowledges the important and much-needed contribution it makes to global resettlement efforts. The suite of services and supports provided to humanitarian entrants as part of the program are critical to sustaining resettlement objectives and achieving positive outcomes for people settling in Australia under the Humanitarian Program.

As noted in the Discussion Paper, shifts in the global humanitarian environment have created unprecedented pressures and demand for places within the Humanitarian Program. UNHCR reports a relentless cycle of new crises emerging before old crises have abated, “[l]ast year alone, UNHCR managed 43 active emergency declarations across 25 countries, including 26 new emergencies in 2024 and 17 ongoing crises from 2023.”⁸ It is important that the Australian Government is able to adapt its Humanitarian Program to address the changing demands in the region and globally; and in this current global situation and commensurate need, the Australian Government should continue acting on its commitment to grow the overall Humanitarian Program.⁹

⁷ UNHCR, *Operational Guidelines on Complementary Pathways*, 6. Family reunification, <https://www.unhcr.org/complementary-pathways-guidance/8-family-reunification/>

⁸ UNHCR, *Projected global resettlement needs 2026*, pg.15, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/projected-global-resettlement-needs-2026>

⁹ Pledge by the Australian Government from the 2023 Global Refugee Forum:

FASSTT endorses the Refugee Council of Australia's recommendation for the increase to the Humanitarian Program:

*"The Australian Government should increase the Humanitarian Program to 22,000 Refugee and SHP places, costed in the 2026-27 Federal Budget, with a projected staged increase to 27,000 resettlement places by 2028-29."*¹⁰

D. Strengthen settlement program/services and capacity to provide psychosocial support

The program of humanitarian settlement support provided by the Australian Government includes HSP/HISP, AMEP, SETS and PASTT, which together, are designed to provide wrap-around assistance for humanitarian entrants to Australia to address settlement needs comprehensively. Specialist trauma services play a critical role in facilitating positive integration and settlement outcomes; and the early identification of clients in need of torture and trauma treatment and rehabilitation services is enabling and provides early access to services, which places them on a path towards healing and recovery sooner.

FASSTT considers it essential that the suite of settlement programs and services are trauma informed and facilitative of recovery and healing, and have the capacity to provide psychosocial support flexibly to address a broad spectrum of psychosocial needs that can change and fluctuate over time. This service approach is necessary as there is high prevalence of people from refugee backgrounds that have experienced torture or other trauma; and their recovery from the impact of torture and other trauma is best achieved with the support of services that can meet their needs and together address the uniquely dynamic inter-relationship of trauma, settlement, and personal life challenges. Service providers should also be aware of and responsive to people with intersectional identities (which can include ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexuality, age, and disability).

As the Humanitarian Program intake can be affected by the global environment (including in emergency situations responding to humanitarian crises), it is important that the program of settlement services and supports possess the ability to scale and match service provision according to changes to the Humanitarian Program intake (both in number and composition), while also maintaining service capacity for humanitarian entrants who have been living in Australia for longer. FASSTT would welcome increased opportunities to engage in collaborative planning and strategising at a national level between FASSTT systems and government agencies, settlement service providers, and other partners.

E. Develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with humanitarian crises

FASSTT strongly endorses the need for the Australian Government to have a planned and coordinated approach that gives it the capability to respond to humanitarian crises effectively. We believe that the development of such an approach will need to be comprehensive and involve an array of strategies that can be deployed in a coordinated and planned manner, to address

"The Australian Government commits to gradually increase Australia's Humanitarian Program commencing from 2023-24", <https://www.unhcr.org/au/global-refugee-forum-2023>

¹⁰ As advised to FASSTT by Refugee Council of Australia about its submission for Australia's 2025-26 Humanitarian Program

needs through different but complementary means, which for example may include: i) Contribute to addressing and amelioration of the source causes for the humanitarian crisis; ii) Support for neighbouring (and/or other) States that are experiencing movement of forcibly displaced people (internally displaced and first displacement); iii) Provision of protection and support through resettlement in a third country where it becomes a necessary option to achieve safety and save lives. The approach would require the capability to call together and integrate the actions of different Commonwealth agencies, including but not limited to Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs, Health and Ageing, and Social Services; together with state and territory counterparts.

We observe that proposals have been developed by the sector on this matter and offer a foundation on which further discussions can be held.^{11 12} FASSTT suggests that the Australian Government convenes roundtable discussions with key parties and stakeholders utilising these documents and the feedback from this consultation, as a basis for developing the whole of government and sector strategy for Australia's response to global emergencies and humanitarian crises. It is important that FASSTT agencies are represented in these discussions, given the role and importance of trauma support services in responses to humanitarian crises. We take the opportunity to draw attention to the important role that community-led organisations have had in supporting and responding to the needs of their community members as demonstrated during recent humanitarian crises – providing support and services to diaspora communities as well as to new arrivals in Australia that have been displaced – and we ask the Australian Government to also include them in all relevant discussions on this matter.

For further information about this submission, please contact:

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¹¹ UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, Policy Brief 15- Ensuring protection in humanitarian emergencies: A framework for Australia, <https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/law/kaldor/2024-09-24-policy-brief-emergency-protection.pdf>

¹² Refugee Council of Australia, Key Points on Australia's Humanitarian Program 2024-25 Discussion Paper, <http://refugeecouncil.org.au/key-points-2024-25-humanitarian-program/>

Appendix 1

FASSTT Member Agencies

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