Strategic Plan 2026-28



Refugee Legal: Defending the Rights of Refugees

Refugee Legal:
Strategic Plan
2026-28

Acknowledgement of Country

Refugee Legal acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands across Australia and, in particular, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong Boon Wurrung peoples of the Eastern Kulin Nation, as well as the Kaurna people (Adelaide) and the Larrakia peoples (Darwin), traditional custodians of the land on which our offices and services are situated. We pay deep respect to elders both past and present.

Our History

Thirty-eight years ago, what is now Refugee Legal was founded by a remarkable and diverse group of people. It sprang from a simple, core conviction that no matter who you are or where you're from, you should be able to get a fair go before the law – and that immigration law had become so complex and onerous that legal assistance was essential.

Every single day since, the truth of this conviction has been borne out. Every day for the past 38 years, there has been one constant that has underpinned all of our work whatever the crises around us – our commitment to helping vulnerable people in predicaments that could hardly matter more: seeking protection from persecution, safety from family violence, freedom from detention and reuniting with family. Whether they eventually win or lose their cases, they know that they have been represented by people who have never given up on them, who have respected them, and have served them with high professional skill and integrity.

In the face of constant, complex change – and growing demand – Refugee Legal's purpose and focus have remained steadfast on the provision of free legal assistance to refugees, people seeking asylum and vulnerable migrants. This legal bedrock underlies our other core activities of legal education, advocacy and law reform to promote fair, just, humane refugee and migration policies in accordance with human rights and the rule of law.

Refugee Legal's plans and actions have been assessed on whether they promote the legal protection, well-being, respect and dignity of people who seek our help. Our approach continues to combine legal, educational and policy work as part of an integrated, strategic approach.





Our History (continued)

Over the past 38 years, we have operated in an environment characterised by unprecedented global conflict and humanitarian crises.

In Australia, while in recent years there has been some real progress on certain reform priorities – including lifting many out of prolonged limbo to permanency, protection processing and increasing the Humanitarian Program intake – the policy terrain has been marked by systematic denial of fundamental legal protections, endangering rights and lives.

These factors have been key drivers of the exponential rise in unmet legal need and the unceasing escalation in demand for our services.

In response, we have continually expanded our capacity to address this need through strategies which include building resources and developing innovative legal services and extensive pro bono partnerships. This has enabled us to rapidly mobilise and scale up services to respond effectively to particular crises as they arise.

In addition, we have challenged systemic injustices to enhance legal protections for many, particularly through strategic litigation – prevailing in 12 out of 12 High Court test cases.

In 2014, we confronted unprecedented legal need, unprecedented erosion of basic rights, and unprecedented funding cuts for legal assistance by the Federal Government. In response, we embarked on a strategy to expand our capacity to address legal need through a major scale-up of our volunteer and pro bono partnership programs and the diversification of funding sources.

During the life of the previous Strategic Plan, we expanded our on-the-ground presence to meet the ever-escalating need. This included providing unprecedented legal help across Victoria, dedicated services in South Australia (Refugee Legal SA), and establishing the Northern Territory's first specialist refugee legal service (Refugee Legal NT), co-located with Melaleuca Australia in Darwin.

In all areas of our work, partnerships and collaboration have been central, with a vast network of volunteers, pro bono corporate law firms, NGO sector agencies, leading law schools, UNHCR and other international bodies, and the wider community.

Staff, volunteers and pro bono partners have done what they do best: provide legal help – and hope. This work has resulted in so many remarkable wins for clients, which have changed the course of their lives for the better.

At the heart of our work lie personal lives and unique stories. The people we assist come from all corners of the globe and from extraordinarily rich and diverse backgrounds and cultures. They have been granted protection, found safety from family violence, been freed from detention, reunited with family, or had their residency restored. Short case studies have been included to introduce a cross section of our clients to you. Their plights have also been the driving force of our policy reform and advocacy work.

Ahmed's Story

Ahmed*, a Ugandan national, came to Australia as a refugee 16 years ago. In October last year, he was detained and told he would be deported to Nauru within weeks – on a 30-year Nauruan visa that he did not ask for or want. Deported into permanent exile – torn apart from his Australian citizen partner and his baby daughter.

In 2024, the Minister had personally cancelled Ahmed's visa. But Ahmed had been found to be a refugee so could not be returned to his home country due to fears of persecution.

To prevent his deportation, we brought an urgent challenge in the Federal Court which put a hold on his removal pending consideration of his case.

In March this year, the Court ruled in Ahmed's favour. It found that the Minister's cancellation of Ahmed's visa in 2024 was legally unreasonable as it was based on very outdated information fundamental to the decision.

The Court ordered Ahmed's permanent visa be reinstated. He was immediately released from detention. Ahmed remains in Australia with his family in safety and security.

An Introduction to our Plan

An overview

This Strategic Plan 2026-28 brings together in one document Refugee Legal's aspirations – our Vision, Purpose, Objectives and Values to tell the story of who we are, why we exist, what we do, and how we want to do it.

Taken together, our aspirations provide a decision-making framework for us as an organisation and as members of management, staff and volunteers.

After an assessment of the complex environment in which Refugee Legal operates, gathering and analysing information and feedback, this plan sets out the challenges we face, the guiding framework that will assist us, and the priority actions we will take over the next three years.

Implementing our plan

A Strategic Plan is never set in stone; it is meant to be a living document.

Our aspirations provide a clear framework for decision-making. However, not all priorities can be pursued at the same time or with equal intensity. The implementation of this plan will therefore require ongoing strategic judgement – assessing emerging needs, opportunities and risks and determining where Refugee Legal should focus its effort and resources in order to achieve the greatest impact.

Our work will be guided by evidence, learning and reflection. We will draw on data, research, practice insights and the experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum to understand what is working, where improvements are needed and how our efforts can achieve the greatest impact.

Lasting change requires collaboration. We will work alongside community organisations, legal partners, advocates, researchers and policymakers to strengthen collective efforts, amplify voices and influence systems that affect the rights and lives of refugees and people seeking asylum.

We operate in an increasingly complex environment – at both the domestic and international levels – which is undergoing fundamental change. In this context it is critical that we continue to be open to learning from experience, testing new approaches and adapting our work as circumstances change, ensuring that we continue to respond effectively to emerging needs and opportunities.



Our Strategic Opportunity

The nature of the challenge

Refugee Legal operates in an environment characterised by perpetual uncertainty, upheaval and change.

This will continue to be the case into the foreseeable future as international tensions heighten, conflicts multiply and intensify, governments change, the dire impact of climate change deepens, borders close, anti-immigration policies and populist xenophobia rise, and the number of refugees and other displaced people soars to unprecedented levels.

As noted above, despite some real progress in certain priority areas, the harshness of government policies, both here and abroad, persists. However, there is a strong and positive undercurrent of goodwill from individuals, communities, and organisations toward people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants that drives a continued push for refugee and immigration policies that are fair, just, equitable and humane.

This plan has been developed in a changing political landscape. While the issues remain complex, the needs great and the challenges profound, this new era presents real opportunity for fundamental reform.

Our strategic approach

Our strategy seeks to answer one central question: *how can we help as many people as possible with the resources we have?* We know we cannot help everyone, but we can help many – and by working strategically, we can maximise the impact of every resource entrusted to us.

Refugee Legal has survived and thrived because its purpose is clear and its principles are strong. Its Committee of Management, staff, volunteers and partners bring expertise, practical judgment, persistence and deep commitment to the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum.

At the same time, the environment in which Refugee Legal operates is highly dynamic. Government policy settings change, patterns of demand shift and new legal needs emerge. Our approach therefore combines clarity of purpose with strategic adaptability – maintaining focus on our mission while adjusting how we deliver services to respond to changing circumstances.

This strategic approach operates both within service delivery, where we manage demand and allocate resources to areas of greatest need, and across the organisation, where we align legal services, advocacy and partnerships to contribute to broader policy reform and systemic change.



The key to our adaptability is our ability to:

- Monitor the impact of government policy changes on demand for services – including in areas such as onshore protection, temporary protection, family violence, detention, visa cancellations and family reunion – and adjust service delivery where appropriate to maximise impact and effective use of resources.
- Engage with refugee and migrant communities and other key stakeholders to understand emerging legal and related needs.
- Use the Legal Clinic Program Model to respond to diverse and high-volume legal needs in an efficient and accessible way.
- Maintain Special Projects capacity to respond flexibly and strategically to new and emerging areas of need.
- Use technology to enable effective access to services and improve the delivery of legal assistance.
- Secure additional resources to expand service delivery, including through volunteers, pro bono partnerships and other forms of collaboration.
- Maintain and develop an Integrated Wellbeing Strategy for staff, volunteers and clients across all interactions, systems and processes.

Our next phase

Refugee Legal is well placed to build on its strengths – deep expertise, strong values, trusted partnerships, and a committed workforce – to expand services and help shape meaningful change.

In this Strategic Plan we will better leverage what we already do well, strengthen capability and communications, harness community goodwill, explore opportunities in new technologies including AI, and lead in emerging areas of human rights protection. By doing so, Refugee Legal can continue to respond to soaring needs while influencing policy and driving reform.

Our Strategic Plan

Refugee Legal - Who we are

Refugee Legal is an independent, non-profit community legal centre, specialising in refugee and immigration law, policy and procedure. We are Australia's largest provider of free legal assistance to refugees, people seeking asylum and vulnerable migrants.

Our Vision - What we want to see

Refugee and immigration policies which treat people fairly, justly, equitably, humanely, and in accordance with human rights and the rule of law both in Australia and internationally.

Our Purpose - What we do

We promote and protect the rights of refugees, people seeking asylum and vulnerable migrants.

Our Strategies - How we do it

Advise and assist
Legal advice and casework, and special projects

We advise and assist refugees, people seeking asylum and vulnerable migrants through a combination of direct legal assistance to many and strategic legal action for systemic change. We seek to defend people's rights, to secure protections, redress injustices, and promote legal and policy change.

Educate
Legal education and community legal education

We educate to improve ethics, competence and professional standards, to raise awareness within the community, develop understanding, inspire ideas and collaborations, and build action for change.

Advocate
Policy and advocacy

We advocate at local, national, and international levels to combat systemic injustices which threaten rights and lives, and to promote immigration and refugee policies that are fair, just, equitable and humane. We do this together with key partners in public and private forums and through the media.

Operate sustainably

We employ a range of strategies to secure diversified funding sources, including donors, philanthropic foundations and government, to ensure financial sustainability. We also harness the goodwill, resources and expertise of pro bono law firm partnerships, volunteers and the broader community to support our work.

Develop partnerships and external relationships

Partnerships and external relationships are central to all core areas of our work, these:

- Ensure the direct experience and voices of refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants remain integral to our work.
- Help us combine strategies and resources with other sector partners to heighten our effectiveness and impact and build sector-wide capacity.
- Allow us to harness the pro bono resources and expertise of the legal sector which, in turn, increase access to our legal and other services.
- Build solidarity amongst key stakeholders who have a shared and common commitment to promoting and protecting asylum seekers and refugees.

Our values in action

Human dignity and human rights

Every person is equal in dignity and rights and is valued and respected. Human rights are universal; they derive from the inherent dignity of every person.

The international human rights framework and the rule of law underpin the work that we do. We respect basic rights and freedoms and promote inclusive, equality-based, non-racist, non-discriminatory immigration, citizenship and refugee law, policy and procedures.

In this context, we live in a diverse multi-lingual, multicultural society and value and respect people for who they are, what they believe in, and how they wish to live their lives. Our services are safe, reliable, accessible and responsive.

Effectiveness

We aim to make a positive impact on the lives of our clients, families and communities, our staff and volunteers, and our supporters and partners.

We use our expertise, practical skills, and resources strategically to adapt and adjust to meet client and community needs and maximise the broader impact of our work.

Empathy and compassion

Empathy and compassion help us understand the perspectives, concerns, needs, and feelings of our clients, and drive our desire to assist.

Integrity

We do what we say and say what we do. We live our values. We treat others the way we would like to be treated ourselves. We are accountable, honest and take responsibility for our decisions and actions.
We embrace diversity and different perspectives. We are prepared to tackle complex and challenging problems. We are experts in our field and maintain the highest professional and ethical standards.

Our Objectives and Priorities for 2026-28

Advise and Assist

We advise and assist refugees, people seeking asylum and vulnerable migrants through a combination of direct legal assistance to many and strategic legal action for systemic change. We seek to defend people's rights, to secure protections, redress injustices and promote legal and policy change.

To advise and assist as many people as possible, we will:

- Expand and strategically target our core, integrated legal services – telephone advice, day and evening in-person/online advice services, full casework representation, legal clinics, strategic litigation and community information sessions.
- Strengthen and expand access to our services in regional, rural and remote areas of Victoria, building our presence in priority areas, including development of outreach services.
- Further develop our Clinic model to respond flexibly to times of surge or high-volume service demand arising from global crises or government policy changes.
- Pursue high-impact strategic approaches, including legal action through the Courts to safeguard and advance the rights of refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in accordance with the rule of law.

Maintain and develop targeted programs and services, including:

- Refugee Legal SA, providing access to legal services in South Australia.
- Refugee Legal NT, providing access to legal services in the Northern Territory.
- The Protection Visa Backlog Processing Program, providing assistance to people apply for appealing decisions related to their protection claims.
- Temporary Protection Visa Conversion Program, providing assistance to temporary protection visa holders to apply for permanency.
- The Family Reunion Program, supporting people granted permanent residence onshore and offshore under the Humanitarian Program.
- The Afghan Legal Program, providing targeted assistance for people impacted by the crisis in Afghanistan.
- Special Projects, providing targeted legal assistance through a project-based response to areas of particular priority with a specific and compelling need for legal assistance, enabling a flexible and targeted way to address areas of new and emerging need.
- A project-based approach to character refusal/cancellation matters.

Family violence program

We will transition our Family Violence service into a separate and expanded program and seek additional resources to support this multi-dimensional service.

Our Objectives and Priorities for 2026-28

Educate

We educate within the community, to increase knowledge, develop understanding, raise awareness, inspire ideas and collaborations and build action for change. We educate within the legal/migration agent profession to improve ethics, competence and professional standards.

To increase knowledge, skills, capability and capacity across the community, professional and organisational domains, we will:

- Expand the range and reach of our community-based information and education programs, strengthening access to clear and practical information about refugee and migration law.
- Strengthen community legal education in regional, rural and remote areas of Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory via in-person outreach services.
- Develop the knowledge and skills of locally based volunteers, partners and community stakeholders to support access to legal information and assistance.
- Maintain and strengthen our Professional Legal Education Program, supporting legal and non-legal professionals to build expertise in areas of our practice priority.
- Increase our capacity to share knowledge and information through updates on key developments in law and policy.
- Promote increased and improved public awareness and informed dialogue on key issues in refugee and migration law and policy, including through public presentations and forums, commentary in the media, articles, e-news and fact sheets.
- Support the professional development of staff and volunteers to hone skills, knowledge and capabilities to deliver programs in the provision of multi-disciplinary support.
- Further develop knowledge sharing systems and practices to strengthen organisational capability, capacity and collaboration.
- Develop and expand our engagement with universities, including through legal clinic programs and other collaborative education initiatives.
- Expand legal professional pathways.
- Strengthen partnerships with universities and the legal profession to expand pathways into legal education and employment for students from refugee and migrant backgrounds, including through internships, fellowships and other professional placements.

Our Objectives and Priorities for 2026-28

Advocate

We will advocate at local, national and international levels to combat systemic injustices which threaten rights and lives, and to promote immigration and refugee policies that are fair, just, equitable and humane. We do this together with key partners and through the media, in public and private forums.

Advancing the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in accordance with the rule of law in Australia and internationally, we will:

- Expand and develop our capacity for advocacy and policy work through our dedicated Special Projects and Policy Program.
- Develop policy positions and reform proposals in priority areas to advance rights, accountability and change.
- Engage with key policymakers to promote reform in areas of strategic priority.
- Use insights from our client work casework to inform policy, influence and advocacy, ensuring the direct experience of clients shapes systemic responses.
- Strategically challenge systemic injustices through the development of enhanced legal protections for many; in particular, through strategic litigation.

Strengthen partnerships to expand impact

- Deepen collaboration with community organisations and national networks working to advance refugee and migrant rights.
- Expand pro bono partnerships across metro, regional, rural, remote and interstate areas to extend the reach and access to our services.
- Continue to develop and strengthen international partnerships and collaboration to challenge systemic injustices, advance access to human rights protections and rule of law frameworks at regional and global levels.
- Strengthen collaboration with regional and global strategic litigation partners, to advance shared reform objectives.
- Continue to engage with researchers and academics to advance evidence-base.

Strengthen communications and public engagement

Develop and implement a comprehensive Communications Strategy to support Refugee Legal's legal work, advocacy and public engagement through:

- Advocacy to shape the national narrative by amplifying positive stories and countering harmful and discriminatory rhetoric.
- Enhancing digital engagement, including through social media, storytelling and accessible public-facing content.
- Strengthening communication of Refugee Legal's core vision and purpose, policy positions, strategies and impact.
- Strengthening Refugee Legal's role as a leader on emerging issues which impact directly on people's human rights, dignity and future safety.

Objectives and Priorities continued…

Amplify refugee and migrant voices

- Ensure the voices of refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants inform and shape our advocacy and policy work, drawing directly on the experiences and perspectives of our clients and their communities.
- Champion and amplify these voices in public debate and policy discussions to strengthen informed, just and humane responses to refugee and migration issues.

Advance policy reform by building on existing proposals and developing new initiatives in priority areas, including:

- Removals to Nauru
- Immigration detention
- Protection visa processing system
- Temporary to permanent protection
- Family reunion
- Family violence
- Character refusal and cancellation matters
- Humanitarian intake
- Offshore detention
- Access to legal assistance
- Access to the rule of law
- Income and other social supports
- International regional engagement/regional cooperation framework
- Environmentally displaced people
- Externalisation policies
- Access to asylum

Margaret's Story

Margaret*, a citizen of Namibia, met Steven, an Australian citizen, when they both travelled to Hong Kong. They quickly formed a serious relationship and over the next few years spent as much time together as they could, given that they were living in different countries. In 2018, Margaret was granted a prospective marriage visa so that she could travel to Australia to marry Steven. They married and lived happily together. Steven sponsored Margaret for a partner visa. After a few months, Steven became very controlling of Margaret and then began to assault her. The police were called and they moved Margaret to a refuge for her safety.

Margaret notified Immigration that her marriage was over and provided documents, including the intervention order issued for her protection. Her partner visa application was refused by the Department on the basis that there was no evidence that Steven and Margaret's marriage had been genuine.

Refugee Legal NT was contacted to represent Margaret when she appealed the decision to the Administrative Review Tribunal. We helped Margaret to put before the Tribunal the extensive evidence she had about the genuineness of her marriage and made legal submissions to the Tribunal. The Tribunal accepted that the marriage between Margaret and Steven had been genuine and that, as a survivor of family violence, Margaret met the legal requirements for the grant of a partner visa even though her marriage was over.

Margaret has finally received her visa and is rebuilding her life.

Our Objectives and Priorities for 2026-28

Operate Sustainably

We employ a range of strategies to secure diversified funding sources, including philanthropic foundations, major donors, individual donations from the community, government grants, as well as generous pro bono and financial support from our corporate law firm partners, to ensure financial sustainability. We also harness the goodwill, resources and expertise of volunteers and the broader community to support our work.

Programs to ensure that Refugee Legal operates sustainably in implementing this plan will include:

Digital strategy

To continue to strengthen our digital capability to support service delivery, knowledge sharing and organisational resilience, we will:

- Continue to develop, hone and implement our Digital Strategy, with a focus on knowledge management, knowledge sharing and cybersecurity.
- Use digital tools and emerging technologies to strengthen the capabilities of staff and volunteers.
- Harness opportunities from AI and other technologies, while carefully managing risks in areas such as data quality, ethics, critical thinking and costs.

Health and wellbeing

To support the wellbeing of clients, staff, pro bono lawyers and volunteers, underpinned by our values – central to sustainable and effective service delivery and staff recruitment and retention, we will:

- Continue to develop and implement our Wellbeing Strategy to support psychosocial wellbeing of clients, staff and volunteers.
- Ensure our policies and practices remain aligned with contemporary and evolving good practice in psychosocial wellbeing and trauma-informed work.

Evaluation of impact and quality

To ensure an understanding and demonstration of impact, which is essential to learning, accountability and continuous improvement, we will:

- Strengthen evaluation and research on the impact of our work, including the economic and social impact generated through volunteer and pro bono programs.

Objectives and Priorities continued...

Quality outcomes

To ensure quality outcomes, we will:

- Continue to monitor and evaluate the impact of our service delivery on access, quality of services, decision-making and outcomes for clients, adapting our services accordingly.
- Embed the voices and needs of refugees and migrants in our practices.
- Strive for continuous improvement in service delivery and operational areas.

Communications strategy

To strengthen effective communication about access to our services, engagement, advocacy and organisational impact, we will:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive organisation-wide Communications Strategy, supported by a Communications Implementation Plan and a Stakeholder Engagement Plan.
- Strengthen engagement, collaboration and retention of key stakeholders, including partners and supporters in South Australia, the Northern Territory and across rural, regional and remote Victoria.

Volunteers and partnerships

To ensure that volunteers and pro bono partners remain fundamental to our ability to extend the reach and impact of our work, we will:

- Maintain and further develop volunteer and pro bono programs.
- Strengthen our Secondment Program to deepen collaboration with legal partners.
- Scope the development of a Law School Graduate Program to support future pathways into refugee and migration law.

Funding

To ensure that we continue to secure sustainable funding to support service delivery and implementation of the Strategic Plan, we will continue to develop and implement a range of strategies to secure sustainable funding from a diversity of sources, including donors, philanthropic foundations, bequests, fundraising appeals and State and Federal Government funding which will strengthen the long-term sustainability of our work.



Aisha's Story

Aisha* is a 44-year-old woman from Saudia Arabia who kept her sexuality a secret due to her fears of what might happen if it was known in Saudia Arabia.

After travelling to Australia in 2018, she continued to hide her sexuality, fearing the consequences of returning to Saudia Arabia, where her sexuality could result in severe harm.

In 2019, with the help of a community member, but without any legal help, Aisha applied for a protection visa.

In 2021, the Department asked her to attend an interview. Unsure how to navigate the online interview process – and not having any legal assistance – Aisha was too scared to attend the interview. Shortly after, the Department refused her visa application, stating that her claims were not credible.

Aisha appealed the decision to the then Administrative Appeals Tribunal. In February 2025, she received an invitation to attend a hearing in May 2025. She immediately contacted us for help.

With our legal help, she was able to express her deep fears of persecution and to explain why she could not return to Saudia Arabia, particularly given the harm she would face if she was open about her sexuality.

In August 2025, the Tribunal ruled in her favour, recognising her as a refugee owed protection in Australia. They found her testimony "compelling and nuanced", and accepted that she had concealed her sexuality both in Saudia Arabia and in Australia for fear of harm. Aisha was granted a protection visa.

She is so relieved to be able to live here and at last be open about her sexuality.

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