

New Zealand: beyond the quota

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The New Zealand government accepts refugees with disabilities and has established structures and partnerships to facilitate their participation in society.

New Zealand's commitment to ensuring that refugees with a disability are not excluded from the country's refugee resettlement quota is longstanding. In accepting Asian refugees from Uganda in 1973, Labour Prime Minister Norman Kirk insisted that New Zealand's refugee intake include a significant proportion of 'handicapped' (the terminology has since changed) cases. Reporting Mr Kirk's announcement, the capital city's *Evening Post* newspaper wrote: "New Zealand should not say it wants only 'the best apples in the barrel'. He [Kirk] was sure that most New Zealanders would agree that these were the people who needed help most."

It was evident even then that injury and disease were all too often the consequence of dispossession and flight, and that compassion should not be limited to providing refuge for the young and able bodied only. New Zealand continued to accept refugees considered harder to settle on health and other grounds in the following decades and today refugees with special needs, who for whatever reasons – including medical – are considered harder to settle, continue to be accepted as part of New Zealand's annual refugee quota.

Quotas and commitments

New Zealand is party to both the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. More than 30,000 refugees have arrived since 1944, when refugees were first distinguished from other immigrants in official statistics. The government formalised its commitment to a set quota of refugees (which included people from each of the UNHCR's designated vulnerable categories) in 1987 when it established an annual quota of 800 refugees.

Currently the quota stands at 750 and is divided into three subcategories: Women at Risk (minimum 75 places), UNHCR Priority Protection (600 places including up to 300 for family

reunification and 35 for emergency cases) and Medical/Disabled. This last has a maximum of 75 places available.

The Medical/Disabled subcategory is designed to accommodate refugees with medical, physical or social disabilities – factors which would normally place them outside the usual criteria for acceptance by resettlement countries. Generally, applicants under this category have a medical condition that cannot be treated in their country of refuge, and resettlement to New Zealand is considered life-saving or of such benefit that it will significantly improve their medical condition and well-being. Medical cases are referred for advice concerning the availability of suitable treatment in New Zealand. Feedback from these sources is taken into consideration in the decision-making process.

In cases where there is an apparent physical or psychological condition, full medical reports are provided by UNHCR for assessment by health authorities in New Zealand. The full disclosure of the condition and its effects is essential for planning purposes, facilitating an effective early warning process for health authorities to ensure they have time to plan appropriate and necessary treatment and support for those refugees arriving in New Zealand, while ensuring that New Zealand's relatively small (in world terms) publicly-funded medical system is not overwhelmed.

As with the Women at Risk category, the Medical/Disability category accounts for around 10% of the annual quota. The numbers in each category have varied over the years depending on the referral and acceptance rate of refugees in the other categories. If UNHCR does not refer enough cases to New Zealand for a particular category, then the numbers in other groups, such as protection or family reunion, may be increased accordingly.

New Zealand's refugee policy aims to ensure its quota remains targeted at refugees in the greatest need of resettlement, while balancing this with its ability to provide good settlement outcomes to those accepted under the programme. The balance between meeting these commitments and New Zealand's capacity to absorb and provide for a number of people who will inevitably need significant health, education and welfare assistance in their initial years is a fine one, and has necessitated the development of durable solutions in order to provide an effective response.

Strategy and structure

The constitutional framework of New Zealand places great importance on respect for peoples' cultural, ethnic, racial and religious differences and their right to participate equally in society. The rights of resettled refugees are protected by New Zealand law, which covers all forms of discrimination and racism and upholds peoples' rights and freedoms of speech, religious belief and political opinion. A Health and Disability Commissioner was established in 1994. Specific bodies such as the Human Rights Commission, Office of the Race Relations Conciliator, refugee councils and incorporated associations also support the rights and interests of resettled refugees. Increasingly, local councils are appointing ethnic community coordinators to facilitate understanding of ethnic and racial diversity and to provide assistance and support to ethnic communities on a range of matters.

The New Zealand Settlement Strategy (NZSS) was launched in 2004 (revised in 2007) to provide an integrated framework that focuses on proactively supporting migrants, refugees and their families to settle in New Zealand. The NZSS provides the basis for a 'whole-of-government' approach to supporting good settlement outcomes. The Settlement National Action Plan (SNAP), launched in 2007, sets out what will be done at a national level,

with a range of initiatives including funding for resettlement of refugees, assessment of refugee qualifications, English language tuition for school children and adults, careers advice and support for those seeking work, and the development of a national network of settlement information services. Regional strategies and action plans in Auckland and Wellington are also in place to support the responsiveness of settlement activities in these regions.

Settlement Support New Zealand (SSNZ) is a national settlement network set up to direct newcomers and their families to services they might need during their first years in New Zealand, and is delivered in 18 locations around the country. This entails a collaborative approach involving central government (through the Department of Labour), local authorities and NGOs as appropriate to each location. The initiative focuses on better co-ordinated delivery of settlement advice and information at a local level, and on improving the responsiveness of local services to the needs of newcomers. Refugee Services Aotearoa New Zealand is the key NGO funded to resettle refugees, providing case management, social work and trained volunteer support. Once refugees have moved on from this service they are able to access the SSNZ local point of contact for referral to relevant services.

Over time, New Zealand's refugee policy has evolved in response to changing global circumstances and needs. The New Zealand government has, however, demonstrated a continuing commitment to devote a proportion of its quota to refugees who can significantly benefit from the medical or disability support available in New Zealand.

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