

Joint Standing Committee on Migration

Submission from Mercy Community Services SEQ Ltd

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1 The mix, coordination and extent of settlement services available and the effectiveness of these services in promoting better settlement outcomes for migrants

1.1 Mix, coordination and extent of settlement services

Mercy Community Services believes that the current mix, coordination and extent of settlement services promote effective settlement outcomes for migrants.

However, we also believe that collaborative service delivery by agencies engaged in supporting migrant settlement is an essential component of this service framework. Collaboration in service delivery guarantees greater access for migrants to social services, language training, education and local labour markets and a more cost-effective use of government resources.

Migrants gain higher levels of settlement outcomes when they receive wrap-around support from organisations working in partnership with expertise and resources to support the settlement experience and structure clear pathways across the settlement landscape.

We believe that settlement provision is best placed in the non-government sector in organisations that provide value-added services through their other funded programs to support settlement provision, such as counselling, youth programs and domestic and family violence prevention.

In the early stages of settlement, refugee families often trust services from non-government organisations rather than mainstream government agencies, because of previous negative experiences with government authorities in countries of origin.

In addition, many government agencies, without the initial work done by settlement providers, would be ill equipped to support newly-arrived communities in increasing their skills and capacity to engage with mainstream services.

Recommendation 1

That the current mix, coordination and extent of settlement services for migrants continue, but with an emphasis on collaboration across providers to maximise client outcomes and cost-effectiveness in government funding.

1.2 Regional settlement considerations

Regional settlement areas experience considerable disruption of service from the unpredictable and stop-start nature of the federal government's settlement pipeline. Agencies committed over the long term to supporting migrants in the post-arrival years cannot secure staff and infrastructure and maintain professional expertise when there is little continuity and certainty in migrant arrivals.

Regional areas which have become settlement destinations and are committed to welcoming and supporting overseas arrivals into their communities and local economies are particularly hampered in this by fluctuations in the government's intake priorities and settlement areas, especially when settling humanitarian entrants.

Recommendation 2

That policy framework which determine migrant intake and settlement destinations take into account the impact of erratic arrival numbers and timeframes on local settlement service providers, particularly in regional areas where infrastructure is disproportionately affected by unpredictability.

2 National and international best practice strategies for improving migrant settlement outcomes and prospects

2.1 National best practice strategies

Mercy Community Services strongly supports the use by the settlement sector of the Australian Settlement Services Outcomes Standards issued by the Settlement Council of Australia.

We have adopted the Settlement Standards as our framework for settlement casework and early intervention training and education. This has helped us to drive improvements in outcomes for recently arrived migrant families. We also provide settlement clinics, such as family reunion advice and vision screening, which are not funded by the Department of Social Services, but support the outcomes of the Settlement Standards. These clinics are delivered in partnership with other agencies and commercial organisations.

We have written and published as best practice a series of training modules for early intervention education for humanitarian refugees, with input from content specialists and refugee community elders, which has been endorsed by the Settlement Council of Australia for distribution nationally.

While national standards are a significant and much-needed element of settlement work, along with best practice guides to support their implementation, at present there is no agreed process for professional recognition of the skills needed by the settlement sector workforce. There are no common criteria for qualifications within the various settlement occupations and no accredited means for ensuring professional practice or recognising on-the-job training. Staff working in the sector have no means of demonstrating their professional progress to an externally recognised body, which is standard practice in many other occupational areas. There is also no accreditation pathway to link any on-the-job training for settlement workers into the Australian Qualifications Framework. This is a major gap in the architecture of Australia's settlement process.

Recommendation 3

That the use of the National Settlement Standards by settlement providers be embedded in federal government funding frameworks and assessment of provider applications to ensure consistency in quality of service to clients and improved settlement outcomes.

Recommendation 4

That consideration be given to developing a national framework to strengthen the professionalization and accreditation of workers engaged in settlement activities and to recognise the settlement sector as a defined occupational area requiring agreed standards of practice and customised accredited workforce development and support.

2.2 International best practice strategies

Among the best practice strategies operating internationally, we commend some aspects of settlement systems used in Canada and Scandinavia.

In Canada, there is a four tier strategy for settling migrants which includes:

- economic integration: acquiring skills, entering the job market and achieving financial independence
- social integration: establishing social networks and accessing institutions
- cultural integration: adapting various aspects of lifestyle and engaging in efforts to redefine cultural identity
- political integration: citizenship, voting and civic participation.

In Sweden, newly-arrived migrants or refugees participate in deciding the level and range of settlement service they would like through setting personalised targets within an individualised settlement plan prepared with an agency provider or agent.

Parts of this approach contain a compulsory acquittal element which is linked to clients' eligibility to receive government benefits, supports or assistance.

In parts of Scandinavia, state funded schools remain open during school term holidays for intensive language classes delivered to newly-arrived youth as part of settlement service provision.

Recommendation 5

That policy framework determining settlement parameters encourage individualised care plans for new arrivals to more closely tailor settlement resources to client and community needs.

3 The importance of English language ability for a migrant's or prospective migrant's settlement outcome

3.1 English language ability and settlement outcomes

English language ability profoundly affects migrants' access to employment, services and social connection, all of which contribute to successful settlement outcomes.

Mercy Community Services strongly supports the continuation of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) of English language provision. We also believe that well-structured English language provision should include some level of mandatory attendance requirement and be more closely monitored. Attendance should also be linked to the receipt of benefits and assistance from Centrelink.

Delivery of on-arrival English classes for women with children needs review and re-evaluation. Class attendance for women with small children in the home remains problematic, with many falling behind in English learning and unable to take up tuition. Children who learn English within the Australian school system can lose the ability to communicate clearly with their parents, if their parents do not take full advantage of AMEP provision and are unable to increase their English language competence. This increases intergenerational stress and disrupts family functioning.

For many refugees who have experienced the trauma of war, a prolonged timetable of attendance in larger English classes groups can be problematic. There could be value in more intensive English immersion language provision for groups such as these, who may be at risk of not completing an effective level of English language learning.

Recommendation 6

That English language attendance be more closely monitored and strategies be adopted, including links with Centrelink assistance, that encourage greater uptake and completion of English language support, especially for groups at risk of failing to attain English language competence that would facilitate integration.

3.2 Transition into Australian schooling

There is an urgent need to increase refugee families' understanding of teaching and learning practices in Australian schools and the role parents can play in schooling. There continues to be significant English language barriers in schools and inadequate support given to newly-arrived families to understand how the school system works and how to be a student and parent of a student in Australia. This lack of engagement within the family in young arrivals' schooling has long term negative effects on settlement outcomes.

Mercy Community Services has written a best practice early intervention training module to support newly-arrived refugee families making the transition into Australian schooling and has made this widely available within the Queensland settlement sector.

Recommendation 7

That schools and settlement providers be encouraged to provide structured on-arrival support and training on the role of the family in Australian schooling for newly-arrived entrants.

3.3 English language provision in regional areas

In regional settlement areas, refugees with limited English language ability are attracted to seasonal job vacancies in the agriculture, processing and manufacturing areas rather than to attending English classes, because of the need to find employment where English language skills are not a barrier to entry. While this solves the immediate problem of securing employment, it narrows occupational choices over the longer term because of an entrenched lack of English language skills.

Mercy Community Services commends the work of TAFE AMEP in bridging the English language ability gap in regional areas, providing flexible language services for all entrants and making positive interagency connections with other settlement providers. English language courses delivered within a TAFE setting provide a safe, reliable and high quality training environment for regions and increases migrant students' articulation into further accredited training.

Recommendation 8

That TAFE continue to be the provider of AMEP services to settling communities, especially in regional and rural areas, to ensure ongoing high quality provision of English language training for recently-arrived migrant communities.

4 Whether current migration processes adequately assess a prospective migrant's settlement prospects

Current migration processes do not effectively assess the skill base that migrants and refugees bring with them into the community. There is poor recognition and use by employers of overseas degrees and diplomas, certification and work experience obtained by migrant and refugee cohorts in their source countries. Mainstream service providers are not adequately skilled or resourced for supporting skilled migrants in using their overseas qualifications within the labour market. This produces a net skill loss to the Australian economy.

It is also not clear whether all qualified migrants and refugees are aware of and can take advantage of the government's overseas qualifications recognition system or that this system works closely enough with industry to enable employers to engage with overseas credentials and work experience in their recruitment processes.

Recommendation 9

That the recognition of overseas qualifications be strengthened within industry, employer bodies and settling communities to ensure that all skills are appropriately recognised and used within the labour market and the community.

5 Social engagement of youth migrants, including involvement of youth migrants in anti-social behavior such as gang activity, and the adequacy of the *Migration Act 1958* character test provisions as a means to address issues arising from this behavior

5.1 Inadequate response from mainstream youth services

There is variability in settlement assistance needs among migrant and refugee youth, stemming from differing gender, family and cultural considerations, as well as differing English language proficiency.

Migrant and refugee youth face post-settlement challenges such as poor self-concept, social isolation, adverse home and life events, crowded rental households, trauma, disrupted pathways in schooling and socialising within different networks. Refugee youth in particular face the risk of disengagement from schooling and learning, as well as family and community, with a consequent impact upon protective factors and behaviours in everyday life.

Mainstream youth services generally do not respond adequately to the needs of migrant youth unless they have the resources for and commitment to meeting the needs of this target group. This lack of responsiveness increases where there are relatively lower numbers of migrant youth in providers' catchment areas. Migrant youth are often left out of mainstream community development activities because of a lack of engagement skills on their part and the mainstream community's reluctance to embrace different cultures. Services for youth in Australia are not culturally based and most youth programs do not adapt to the growing diversity within the Australian youth population. Few if any youth services encourage migrant and refugee recruitment or provide relevant activities and information and appropriate cultural supports.

Mainstream services rely on specialist settlement services to meet youth needs, which is not an effective response to community concerns and unsustainable in the long term. Emphasis needs to be placed, via funding criteria, on increased service delivery for this target group by all youth services.

Recommendation 10

That youth services are required, as a condition of funding, to recognise and respond to cultural diversity within youth cohorts and provide services which support young people of migrant and refugee backgrounds.

5.2 Youth in schooling

Migrant youth need support within the school setting to discuss cultural change, intergenerational issues and how to value cultural heritage within and outside family life. There is a need for schools to provide migrant youth with a framework for sharing the challenges of cultural transition and life in the Australian community.

Australian school curriculum could include content which enables migrant young people to undertake a structured, facilitated process for exploring the knowledge, culture and skills they have developed since arrival in Australia that would help them respond to integration challenges.

Recommendation 11

That schools be encouraged to provide structured, facilitated processes that enable migrant young people to explore the knowledge, culture and skills they have developed since arrival and how these contribute to their new identities as young Australians.

5.3 Youth employment

When the economy is weak, migrant youth are disproportionately affected in seeking job opportunities in comparison with young people whose parents are connected to the local labour market and job contacts.

Recently-arrived migrant school leavers have reported to us that securing work post-school is extraordinarily difficult as they cannot rely on their parents having contact with local employers or providing them with appropriate job-seeking advice. They report a deep cultural divide in their school leaving year in how classmates discuss their job prospects and the means family and family friends would use to ease them into local employment.

Recommendation 12

That the job-seeking needs of migrant young people be made a priority within government funded programs that address the needs of youth in our communities.

5.4 Gang activity

Difficulties faced by young people within the settlement sector are inevitably and crucially linked with the difficulties their parents face as migrants and their family's overall success in settlement.

Settlement providers have a major role in promoting understanding of the rights and responsibilities associated with Australian law in a way that is practical and easy to understand and in portraying Australian laws positively within newly-arrived migrant and refugee communities.

Without appropriate and committed support, migrant and refugee young people can disengage from education and learning, not fully understand the Australian legal system and not appreciate the consequences of some behaviours, such as debt acquisition, alcohol and drug use, drink driving, driving without a license and failing to meet financial contracts.

Community elders continue to voice concerns about the impact of racial discrimination migrant young people can encounter at school, in the workplace and within the wider society and the effect this has on their capacity to build a strong self-concept and realise their potential as young adults.

Gang activity is an outcome of unrealised aspirations and the effects of long-term social and structural discrimination experienced by individuals and families. Unemployment and underemployment play a prominent role in the pathway to gang membership. Strategies to secure realisable employment goals are essential to counter the alternatives that gang membership offers disengaging young migrants.

Funding bodies need to assess the extent to which funded youth programs that address disengagement are catering for migrant and refugee young people. While programs have been developed that address potential radicalisation, there appear to be few or no programs that tackle gang membership and activity. However, programs that deal with gang activity will not succeed with

this target group unless they are resourced to understand and address the cultural complexities and pressures of migration and settlement.

Recommendation 13

That programs be developed for delivery by sectors such as schools and youth services that target migrant youth at risk of taking up gang membership and engaging in gang activity.

5.5 The adequacy of the *Migration Act 1958* character test provisions

Mercy Community Services has worked with skilled migrants, overseas students, humanitarian refugee families and unaccompanied minors from a wide range of source countries. In this work, we have not encountered individuals with a substantial criminal record or who posed a significant risk of engaging in criminal conduct in Australia or represented a danger to the Australian community. In our experience, this demonstrates the adequacy of the current character test provisions.

We support the power of the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection to refuse to grant a person a visa if they do not pass the character test. The Minister can also cancel a visa that has already been granted.

We appreciate that, if the Minister were to revise the *Migration Act 1958* and exercise further discretionary powers, there would be general community support for this if measures were put in place to provide for transparent and accountable decision-making processes which were also subject to review.

Recommendation 14

That revisions regarding Ministerial discretionary powers proposed for the *Migration Act 1958* continue to include robust provisions relating to the transparency and accountability of executive decision making.

6 Any other related matter

Mercy Community Services commends the professional support given to our settlement programs by staff within the Office of Settlement and Multicultural Affairs Queensland in the Department of Social Services.