

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration - Inquiry into Regional Migration

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Definitions

Migrants: all temporary and permanent migrants, regardless of their circumstances of arrival in Australia.

Community hubs/hubs: the place-based community hubs operated in primary schools and community centres in culturally diverse Australian communities under the National Community Hubs Program.

These definitions apply for the purposes of this submission unless otherwise specified.

Key abbreviations

CHA: Community Hubs Australia Incorporated

NCHP: National Community Hubs Program

AMEP: Adult Migrant English Program

About Community Hubs Australia

Community Hubs Australia (CHA) delivers the National Community Hubs Program (NCHP) in communities across Australia. We have 74 sites across four states, across metropolitan and regional areas, including three in each of Wollongong (NSW), Shepparton and Geelong (VIC) and seven in South Australia. New hubs are due to open in Rockhampton (three hubs), Townsville (three hubs) and South Australia (3 hubs) in 2020, as part of a nationwide expansion that will see the network grow to 106 sites.

The NCHP serves as a gateway that connect families with each other, with their school, and with existing services. Dozens of community hubs operate under the National Community Hubs Program, which is recognised as a leading model to engage and support migrant women with young children. Community hubs focus on reaching women who have pre-school children and leverage existing facilities in primary schools and community centres.

In most instances hubs are embedded in primary schools and scaffolded onto existing service systems and school infrastructure. Locations are chosen based on the demographic of local communities, with our focus squarely on areas that have high migrant populations, high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, and high levels of vulnerability as measured by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).

Community hubs focus on supporting and engaging migrant and refugee women with preschool children, with no limitations on how long ago they arrived in Australia, or their visa status. We consider this cohort to be among the most vulnerable in the Australian community. Community hubs provide a gateway for migrant women and their children to the wider community by connecting them to the local school, services and community. These connections provide the best opportunity for a favourable settlement outcome.

The NCHP is funded through a combination of state, federal and philanthropic funding. Responsibility for Community Hubs now sits with the Department of Home Affairs. Each hub costs around \$75,000 per year to run – a relatively small investment for a significant social impact. In 2018 an average of 5300 families visited a hub and engaged with their services.

2017 Inquiry into Migrant Settlement Outcomes

In 2017, we made a submission to the Joint Standing Committee's Inquiry into Migrant Settlement Outcomes.

The Committee's response at the time highlighted the important contribution of hubs to social cohesion:

"2.68 Based on the evidence, it is clear that many organisations believe that Community Hubs are an excellent way to engage migrant women and their families and noted many benefits and positive outcomes of the program.

2.69 The Committee notes the evaluations of the Community Hubs program undertaken by Charles Sturt University and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute that found the hubs were effective having engaged migrant families and improved children's literacy and English language skills.

2.70 The Committee is of the view that Community Hubs are a very good model of delivering settlement services and recommends that funding should be increased to expand the program nationally and with greater flexibility of service delivery."

As well as acknowledging the success of the model, the Committee recommended that additional funding be provided to expand the number of hubs. We are delighted that the federal government acted on this recommendation in the 2019 budget, providing ongoing funding for an expanded network.

Response to the ToR

We wish to submit a response to two items in the terms of reference:

- Key local, state and federal initiatives for successful regional settlement outcomes; and
- Local volunteers, employers and community organisations and their role facilitating regional settlement.

Key local, state and federal initiative for successful regional settlement outcomes

The NCHP brings together various local, state and federal initiatives for successful regional settlement. The CHA model links migrant families with programs such as English language classes, vocational education, early learning and school readiness programs, and community and social activities.

The hubs model, which engages migrant families across the four key areas of English, engagement, early years and vocational pathways, provides a safety net against poor settlement outcomes. If a family feels settled and connected to their community, are making friends, learning the language and building a life for themselves, they are more likely to stay.

Community hubs provide a safe space for learning and speaking English. English classes undertaken in community hubs are emerging as an excellent pathway in to AMEP. After spending time in English classes run by hubs, increased confidence in English language skills often leads to enrolling in the AMEP. The positive flow on effect on settlement, from improved English language skills, is immense.

A study by Charles Sturt University found that families that attend community hubs show improvement in language and literacy, specifically in written and spoken English and children who attend hubs show more confidence at school. School principals and teachers reported improved parent/teacher relationships and greater participation, as well as being able to better respond to migrant families. Families that attended hubs were more likely to access and understand available health services.

Hubs in regional areas where public transport may be limited are especially needed. Women with pre-school children are at risk of becoming socially isolated and the associated geographical isolation of some regional areas increases this risk. Local hubs in regional locations mitigate this by connecting families with local services, providing opportunities to meet and make friends with local members of the community and other migrant families, and access both structured and unstructured opportunities to learn English.

Local volunteers, employers and community organisations and their role facilitating regional settlement

The NCHP program speaks to the all the elements of this term of reference. Hubs wrap around local volunteers, employers and community organisations, with a grass-roots intervention that supports families to successfully settle in Australia.

Hubs harness volunteers as part of their community to assist with the delivery of programs within the hubs. Volunteers are vital to the operation of individual community hubs and many programs rely on the contribution of volunteers to deliver specific services. Many hubs also have a volunteer pathway

program, which provides opportunities for hub participants to 'give back' by volunteering at the hubs they attend. In 2018, NCHP provided 9021 volunteering opportunities across the year. The flow on effect results in gaining vocational experience that can eventually be applied to future employment, increasing confidence in English language skills, and having a validated position within the circle of the community – enjoying the benefits of community hubs services as well as contributing to the services, so others enjoy the same benefits.

Hub leaders are chosen, among other reasons, for their connection and involvement with the local community. Hubs also provide employment to the participants that use them. More and more we are seeing women who use the hubs, participate in the volunteer pathway, then go on to be employed by their local hub. This also feeds into the vocational learning opportunities being provided by regional hubs. Many regional hubs offer certificated vocational courses, such as children's services, which then enable participants to seek employment.

The focus on women with young children means that the hubs offer specific programs that aim to better equip young children for learning. Playgroups and other school readiness programs are a core service at community hubs. These programs offer migrant children the same educational opportunities as Australian-born children – which are to learn through play, to use language to interact and communicate and to learn English to a level where they can enter school and not be at a disadvantage. This grass-roots intervention is a future-proofing mechanism for regional areas. If children begin school ready to learn and they (and their parents) already feel connected to the school and the community, successful settlement outcomes are much more likely.

There are multiple barriers to accessing services that migrants experience. Women and those on temporary protection visas are particularly vulnerable and have more difficulty accessing services. The community hubs model transcends these limitations, as it offers assistance to all, regardless of visa category, with a specific focus on women.

The NCHP model requires that each hub partners with local support agencies such as The Smith Family, Access Community Services Limited, and Settlement Services International, that are by nature, providing and connected to local services and community organisations. This partnership creates a gateway for hub participants to access other community organisations outside the hub, such as church groups, local health services like maternal and child health services, and other community interventions. Often the local community hub is the only link outside the home, so it becomes more than a place to go for a cup of tea, but rather is a place to seek help, to make friends, to learn and to grow.

The partnerships with local service providers and the holistic approach to community that hubs embody means that hubs are the first port of call for participants in need. Hubs are people-focused and place-based, so are particularly relevant to supporting regional settlement. Hubs play a critical role in linking new migrants to their newly adopted communities.

Recommendations

Community Hubs Australia recommends that the Australian Government:

- Recognises the critical role that CHA plays in successful settlement outcomes and continues to further invest in the NCHP
- Continues to expand the NCHP into regional areas