



Community Centres SA Inc. response to Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism

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*Community and Neighbourhood Centres
Strengthening local communities*

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Introduction

Community Centres SA Inc. is the peak body for community centres and neighbourhood houses ('community centres') in South Australia, with over 150 community centre and affiliate member organisations throughout the State.

Community Centres SA has worked with members state-wide for 33 years, acting as a catalyst for community development by building the strength, capacity and influence of our sector through advocacy and workforce and organisational development.

Community centres are not-for-profit community organisations in local communities, operating at the grass-roots level using prevention and early-intervention strategies to target disadvantaged, diverse and previously dis-engaged people through community development, health and well-being, social inclusion, education and life skills programs.

Community centres are a critical part of the not-for-profit service network in South Australia and nationally, with a unique contribution to make through our local, 'place-based' approach and accessible programs which are non-stigmatising and non-judgemental.

Community centres are open to all, however with a high proportion of people accessing centres from groups of particular disadvantage, (including culturally and linguistically diverse communities, newly arrived migrants, people on low incomes, refugees, unemployed people, people at risk of social isolation and people with low literacy and numeracy levels), we provide a unique opportunity to reach the most hard-to-reach people.

Community Centres SA and the network of community centres are therefore well-placed to respond to the Select Committee Inquiry on Strengthening Multiculturalism particularly in relation to:

- a. the adequacy and accessibility of settlement and social inclusion services and resources available to individuals and communities;
- b. how to improve the expected standards of public discourse about matters of 'race', colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief;
- c. how to better recognise and value the contribution that diverse communities bring to Australian social and community life;

Recommended Strategies

- Increase adult community education programs including English as a Second Language delivered at the local level
- Provide professional development for English as a Second Language tutors through the AMEP program
- With community and neighbourhood centres as the “hub”, work collaboratively with community members and groups in local communities to develop and implement outcomes focussed plans for “A community where everyone is included and cultural differences respected and celebrated”
- Ongoing strategies that include people on a personal level and give the opportunity to introduce them to people from other cultural backgrounds in a non-threatening way
- Celebrating cultural diversity such as Harmony Day events, Reconciliation Week, Refugee Week and various Cultural Independent Days
- Ongoing cultural development for sector casual workshops for community centres where a particular community can talk openly about their cultural practices to community centre staff and volunteers and those from other interested centres
- More small funding grants for centres wanting to develop projects to enhance intercultural events to foster social cohesion

A Specific Challenge

A number of community centres provide ESL classes, some of which are funded through the Department of State Development, others which are volunteer led. These classes are very popular with the tutors supported through the federally funded Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) Home Tutor Enhancement Project delivered in SA by TAFE SA. The funding to this program has been withdrawn with considerable concern expressed about the professional development gap which will be left for ESL tutors.

The Home Tutor Enhancement Project provided support to community based adult ESL programs including:

- free access to the ESL Training for Tutors and other customised workshops and training sessions
- access to popular published resources
- curriculum advice and support
- contact with other teachers and organisations with similar needs

Centres providing ESL classes have indicated that this will leave a big hole in support for programs, students and volunteer tutors. The support provided in the past has been vital in supporting volunteer tutors and community programs to deliver quality services to culturally and linguistically

diverse people and communities through providing excellent training, workshops catering to specific needs of tutors, skill development, advocacy and resources.

Supporting Information

The strength of the community and neighbourhood centres sector in Australia is its local, grass roots delivery. In this capacity the sector plays a vital role in preventing and intervening early where there is evidence of racism. Our sector has extensive experience and learning from engaging and working with Culturally & Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities at the local level for over 40 years.

The sector has a zero tolerance to racism and proactively works to combat racism on an ongoing basis. Centres promote and encourage social inclusion and resilience through community development practice in a welcoming, non stigmatising environment with a strong volunteer base e.g. community education through cultural awareness forums, extensive partnerships with a variety of multicultural agencies, language and literacy programs that are based on increasing participants ability to survive and flourish in Australian society, employment readiness, community meals, community events, community arts projects, community gardens, children's programs, building confidence and providing information and referral services. Every community centre has a story to tell supported by comments from centre participants, examples of which are below.

Projects currently underway in centres now -

- Involve staff and volunteers in developing a cultural inclusion plan and train staff in cultural competency
- Assist culturally diverse participants to become volunteers in a position of their choice after training with a buddy at the centre as a volunteer.
- Young members of an Afghan community are expressing their strategies to overcome racism in artworks and exhibiting them.
- Provide a creche and meeting place for Grand parents who are Chinese and do not speak English to meet and have a rest from being at home with their grandchildren
- Update digital media (multiple centres) to ensure they are inclusive of all the communities in their area
- Provide new signage (multiple centres) to centres in different languages to ensure people from CALD communities feel welcome to visit
- Provide events which bring together Australian service clubs with new communities.
- Paint murals depicting cultural symbols designed by community members in a school

Further Examples

Community Cultural Exchange Visits: Wandana Community Centre works with members of the Muslim community from various cultural backgrounds. A sessional worker at the centre, who also works for the Muslim Women's Association, identified racism towards members of the Aboriginal community. She found that fear existed which was based upon limited experiences with Aboriginal people which resulted in a 'buying into' negative stereo types.

The worker proposed a series of community cultural exchange visits between Muslim women of various backgrounds and Aboriginal women. In consultation with the City of Port Adelaide Enfield,

members of the Muslim women's group met with an Aboriginal women's group firstly at Lartelare Park, an Aboriginal themed reserve and then at Taoundi Aboriginal College. The Aboriginal women then came to Wandana Community Centre. The program was repeated with Muslim women from Kilburn Community Centre, Junction Community Centre and Cheltenham Community Centre. The women exchanged cultural craft activities and information on customary practices and had time to chat.

During these exchanges both groups acknowledged that they had 'bought into' negative stereo types regarding each other. As a consequence of the cultural exchange program the participants were able to set aside these negative stereo types and form personal relationships and a mutual respect for each other and their customs.

Comments from post visit surveys included:

- "They (Muslim) women are down to earth people who love to learn about our (Aboriginal) culture.I've come to realise us women are more alike than what I first thought."
- "Very friendly people and lovely of them to share culture with me and there food which was very delicious. ...I got a better understanding of them. I respect them.[This type of program] would give Australian people a better understanding of Muslim people in general."
- "I am more aware of their culture and have more understanding of their hardships they endured in their own countries and why they wanted to come to Australia."
- "Both cultures have very different beliefs, religions and lifestyles. One thing I found that both cultures have in common, is that they are very family orientated."
- "I did not know that Muslim women had to leave their homelands for a better life in my country."

This program now includes women from Africa countries as well and is currently in its fifth year.

Example 2

..... "I am South African and heard about Cheltenham Community Centre from a member of the community who lives next door to the centre. Since joining the centre, I volunteer at the centre and feel it is a very resourceful place for members of the community and new arrivals into the country who experience language difficulties and barriers. The centre has helped me by reducing social isolation, increasing self-help and providing opportunities for refugees to come together, learn and celebrate their culture. I have developed the confidence to help refugees who visit the centre with English, sometimes, translating for people in workshops. Cheltenham Community Centre helps people to feel free to come together, share cultural values with Australian people and break down community barriers. People can maintain their identity, and learn new skills for a better chance of succeeding at work and home. The centre feels like home and I am passionate about contributing to society and making a difference to people's lives."

Example 3

Ness is a student in English as a Second Language (ESL). She has two pre-school children who take up much of her time. Fortunately the 2 year old boy enjoys being in the Centre crèche while Ness practices English with her tutor. Sometimes the younger child sits in (in her pram) on the lesson. The determination shown by Ness in mastering English, step by step, word by word, has been truly remarkable. In addition to seeking literacy Ness also wants to be able to communicate by Email. She

has immediate family in Cambodia, North Carolina, and even Queensland. Learning English is always a tough thing to do. To be computer literate in a second language must be harder still. Depending on the email provider, Ness has to understand 'compose' or 'write' or 'new' just to start an email. The Good News is that Ness has persisted in being able to use email, which she can now do, and is now setting out to send and receive attachments (family photos) as well. Ness has had unstinted help from both Literacy tutors and a tutor in computing. It is a credit to Ness that she has not only been able to access Community Centre facilities; she is also sharing her new skills with her family; especially her children.

Example 4

A newly arrived refugee (approximately 1 month in Australia) was brought to Wandana Community Centre by a relative who had accessed services at the centre. He had no English at all. He started to attend the English Conversation group and became an enthusiastic participant. He always completed his homework and we were told that he practiced his new words every day. Assisted by a volunteer in a very small group, he started to recognise some English words and began to practise his English on others at the centre as he came and went from the class. His delight in his mastery of new words and this communication with others was inspiring for the staff and volunteers who came into contact with this man. In 2008 he has undertaken more formal English studies.

Example 5

A woman who had virtually no English language skills joined the English class at the Centre. She was encouraged to join the Women's Group. She enjoyed the social and supportive atmosphere of that group and learned about Australian culture and systems as well as having a chance to practice and improve her English. She gained enough confidence to enrol in English studies at TAFE, having attained a Level 2 in English competency, was successful in those studies and has this year been accepted into a TAFE course to become a Dental Assistant.

Why were they effective?

- Focus on community development
- Place based, local and accessible
- Socially inclusive practice
- Providers of adult community education and ESL classes
- Welcoming, non stigmatising learning environment with clear pathways to further education, training and employment
- Opportunities for personal contact in a safe environment
- Flexible responses based on identified local need
- Strong partnerships across government, non government and local business