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Inquiry into the future of the NDIS

**A submission by
Migrant Resource Centre (Northern Tasmania) Inc**

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Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

This submission has been prepared for Migrant Resource Centre Northern Tasmania Inc. (MRCN) responsible for overseeing the NDIS services provided, and on behalf of MRCN and represent the views of service delivery staff, coordinators and managers.

MRCN was established as a not-for-profit community organisation to facilitate the settlement of migrants into North and North-West Tasmania. MRCN is one of two MRCs operating in Tasmania – the other is MRC Southern Tasmania trading as MRC Tasmania. We highlight this so as to avoid confusion. The MRCs are two separate entities.

MRCN is a settlement service provider and since 1982 has assisted migrants seeking advice for eligible services and arrivals under Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program, approximately 300 persons per annum. In recent years and in response to emerging needs of its clients, MRCN has expanded and now offers a range of services state-wide. These services include National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and other disability support.

MRCN has been providing NDIS services for the past 2 years, predominantly to people from Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. MRCN commenced providing these services due to the successful settlement and support previously provided to migrants. The next logical step was to broaden the scope and types of supports that were provided to new Australians. Through the traditional services provided by MRCN, the team of Social Workers and Case Managers developed eclectic skills in working with members of CALD communities, gaining respect and trust as specialist practitioners in the field. There were very few services that understood the needs of people from CALD backgrounds, and the level of support required.

This submission of MRCN is in relation to CALD communities, and the current and ongoing challenges faced.

Below are responses to two items of the terms of reference:

- a) The future of the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building grants program
- h) Any other related matters (response to the CALD Strategy Progress Update)

a) Future of the ILC program

Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) programs are integral to the long-term sustainability of the NDIS. The benefits of ILC have a positive impact on the lives of people living with disability, their families and carers as well as benefiting the NDIS by reducing people's needs for funded supports.

Source: ILC Policy Framework: A Framework for Information Linkages and Capacity Building (NDIS, 2019).

Delivering these supports through trusted and culturally appropriate organisations and community groups, with existing relationships to priority cohorts such as CALD, ATSI, and LGBTQIA+, will create safe, accessible, welcoming and inclusive ILC delivery. MRCN's Beyond Limits program, supports people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds living with disability, their families and carers through information, linkages and capacity building. The Beyond Limits program supports people through a range of different service delivery models which include 1:1 support, peer networks, peer mentoring, and group based inclusive support programs. Network Coordinators from the Beyond Limits program provide 1:1 support by walking alongside people, supporting people to connect to community and mainstream organisations, access to information and resources through word of mouth, online and social media platforms. MRCN's Network Coordinator's work with people using a person centred and strengths-based approach, with the support of bicultural workers, whilst drawing on local knowledge of existing available services. Beyond Limits provides people opportunities to connect, network and mentor through peer networks, peer support groups and user led community projects. Without these supports, many of the current participants of the NDIS in Northern Tasmania, would not have achieved access to the NDIS for the foreseeable future. Beyond Limits support and host groups on a regular basis that include but are not limited to;

- Rhododendron Group – weekly group that comes together in the aim to increase social interaction within community and improving emotional health and well-being by engaging in community activities such as bowling, stimulating games, sharing stories and experiences. Rhododendron Group was initiated by a Bhutanese gentleman experiencing mental ill-health whilst being supported by Network Coordinators to access funded supports for his goal of increased social and community participation. This gentleman has expressed an increase in confidence, social supports and independently attends group activities three days a week.
- Wednesday English Conversation Group – weekly group that comes together to practice and expand on their conversational English. This group is operated in conjunction with MRCN's settlement program to support inclusion.
- Wednesday and Thursday Citizenship Classes – weekly group that comes together to develop their knowledge of Australia in preparation for their Citizenship test. This group is run in conjunction with MRCN's settlement team to support inclusion within the program.
- Thursday Group – members of Thursday Group meet weekly to engage in activities that build confidence, life skills and knowledge whilst socially interacting with others. Thursday Group engages with local groups and clubs on a regular basis with the support of Network Coordinators and MRCN's volunteers.
- Harmony Community Garden – Ongoing project that supports families from the Bhutanese and Burmese communities, to connect to cultural roots, and integrate with each other through their love of gardening. The Harmony Community Garden has been supported by MRCN's Beyond Limits Program, local school Scotch Oakburn College, and through donations of time and material from families and friends of both the college and MRCN. The Harmony Community Garden has been co-designed by users whilst learning from a permaculture educator under the permaculture ethos of 'Earth Care, People Care, Fair Share'.

Through 1:1 engagement, MRCN's Beyond Limits program has been able to support people to connect with existing services such as; Services Australia, Strong Families Safe Kids, Community Mental Health programs, Refugee Health, Relationships Australia, Launceston Community Legal Centre, Care2Serve

and Carer Gateway, Bapcare, Mission Australia, Anglicare, Housing Tasmania, Legal Aid, Guardian and Administration board and more. MRCN's Beyond Limits program regularly hosts information sessions and drop-in support sessions, providing appropriate bicultural support to assist with engagement. Information session topics are typically presented to us by the people Network Coordinators support.

MRCN's Beyond Limits program has been able to create inclusive opportunities for people that don't exist outside of ILC. The human resources involved in applying the level of assistance required for the diversity of the CALD communities, has had demonstrable results. These outcomes would not have occurred without the support of the ILC grants program.

Recommendation

It is recommended that consideration be given to extend the funding for this particular ILC program for an additional 36 months. The work that has been undertaken has been faced with many challenges, including connection with hard-to-reach communities. Due to COVID, the program was significantly impacted upon, with uptake slow once the isolation was lifted. Beyond Limits still has a requirement to connect with other communities to build on their capacity and understanding of the NDIS. These include but are not limited to; Afghan, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Philippine, and Chinese communities. The Beyond Limits ILC has the capacity to realign focus to undertake the CALD NDIS Strategy, setting the priority areas as KPIs for the current program.

The future of the ILC programs in general, is key for access to the NDIS, for people with lived experience of disability, their families, and carers. It should be considered that ILCs continue to be funded to specifically meet the needs of at risk, vulnerable, disadvantaged, and disengaged communities.

Program Coordinator – Beyond Limits

h) CALD Strategy Progress Update;

The MRCN has been providing NDIS supports for approximately 2 years. These supports consist of Coordination of Supports, Core Supports and Capacity Building. Currently we are the largest specialist CALD NDIS provider in Tasmania. There are a number of other services that have CALD participants, however we are the only service to be providing primary supports to the CALD community, particularly those who have spent time in refugee camps.

MRCN has developed a specialist approach which requires looking at disability through a cultural lens. It was determined early on, that applying the Australian context of disability to individuals and communities from countries where disability receives no funding, resources or application of human rights principles, created barriers to participation. MRCN has created a model of service delivery that, first and foremost, takes into consideration culture. This culture is not just in general, but rather what culture means for the individual. A mistake that is often made in policy, legislation, and service delivery models, is that culture is given such a generic context, that it doesn't really meet the needs of individuals. MRCN has developed strategies to understand what culture means in context for communities, communities within communities, for individuals, and for individuals within families.

MRCN has been fortunate to successfully provide capacity building through an ILC. This ILC has demonstrated the complexity within communities when building capacity, understanding and access to the NDIS. Even MRCN did not comprehend the mammoth task of being able to build capacity within diverse communities. Each time, it has required carefully analysing and understanding that particular culture's response to disability, people living with disability and enabling services to enter their private sphere. Disability within the Australian context exists very much in the public sphere, however for a large number of migrant cultures, disability is kept private and hidden.

MRCN is only able to provide feedback regarding the progress of the CALD Strategy from a Tasmanian perspective.

Uptake

The progress update on the CALD Strategy talks about the uptake of NDIS, sitting at 9.4% of the projected 20%. In MRCN's experience, there are a number of reasons for this within the Tasmanian community. There are a number of cultures that are yet to accept that disability is not negative and that supports are designed to build capacity and improve quality of life. Through the ILC, MRCN has managed to engage with several communities, however limitations in the amount of funding have prevented great diversification to be able to engage with more self-isolating communities. A great deal of work still needs to be done to engage more with, and build the understanding of disability, for a range of cultures. Similarly, there have been many experiences of MRCN where people have not been granted access to the NDIS due to lack of evidence. There is a lack of understanding regarding the challenges faced here, that are not represented in the strategy. Often when individuals are arriving in Australia from refugee camps, they arrive with little information, and in some cases, not even a birthdate. Refugees enter with a basic health manifest that is completed just prior to their arrival in Australia. This lack of evidence creates barriers, as there are few services that are equipped to support and actively engage migrants from refugee backgrounds to build sufficient evidence relating to their disability. MRCN has supported a number of people to secure the evidence required to access the NDIS. This has been undertaken through the ILC, due to the lack of other available supports. There have been experiences where people have been supported to get medical documentation to demonstrate capacity and function, and still been denied access to the NDIS on technical grounds. There is little understanding from the agency staff that most other people entering the scheme have extensive medical, therapy and supportive reports, that enable ease of access. But for individuals from CALD backgrounds, their history living with disability started upon their arrival in Australia.

Recommendation

MRCN would strongly recommend that the CALD ILC funding be extended for a further 36 months to improve the outcomes of the CALD Strategy and be considered Partners in the Community (PITC) for specific cohorts. The extension of the funding should have the priority areas of the strategy, set as the KPIs for this program. CALD ILC providers and NDIS staff should engage more frequently to discuss the key areas and challenges experienced. Until reviewing the CALD Strategy progress update, MRCN had no concept of the percentages of uptake from the CALD communities. Regular review and discussion

with CALD specific providers would increase the likelihood that this could be addressed in a timely fashion.

Priority 1: Engage with Communities

Action 1.1: Targeted NDIA community engagement

The CALD communities have received a level of support and education regarding the NDIS from the Beyond Limits program. This ILC has been the link that communities have with access to and information about the NDIS. The work plan for this program has set objectives regarding engagement, however they are not necessarily consistent with the CALD Strategy as it stands which is counter intuitive to the objective outlined in this document. MRCN has observed a limited amount of community engagement between the NDIA the CALD communities in Northern Tasmania. Until last month, MRCN had only had contact with provider engagement staff in relation to NDIS service provision. Our service has just been made aware of an individual in the community engagement space, who has an interest in closer working relationships with our service, and CALD NDIS participants. MRCN is very welcoming of this person and their interest in building capacity within CALD communities, however a level of engagement will still be required by MRCN to assist in the building of a trust relationship.

The progress update refers to “establishing and strengthening relationships with key stakeholders in CALD communities, hosting community meetings, delivering presentations”. Until MRCN ILC staff approached the community engagement person from NDIS this month, none of the above stated engagement (to our knowledge) has taken place in the North or NW of Tasmania. Information sessions have now been arranged with the local community engagement person, which MRCN believes will strengthen communication channels between CALD communities and the NDIA.

Action 1.8: Campaigns

The progress reports states that in 2019, the NDIA delivered an advertising radio campaign to raise awareness about the NDIS in CALD communities. Unfortunately, this broadcast only went out to community radio stations in Victoria and NSW.

In 2019, a campaign in Queensland encouraged new participants to join the scheme, with a focus on people with disability from CALD backgrounds.

In 2020, the NDIA delivered an NDIS advertising campaign targeting CALD communities to raise awareness about support for participants during COVID-19. The campaign aired on Sydney and Melbourne’s ethnic and multicultural radio stations.

These campaigns have had no obvious impact on the Tasmanian CALD communities. From MRCN’s perspective, this should not really be included as progress, as it is very limited in its delivery to CALD communities in several jurisdictions.

Recommendation

The NDIA make national progress in advertising and campaigns which raise awareness of the NDIS and COVID-19 for CALD communities.

Priority 2: Make information about the NDIS accessible

There is a common misconception that providing written information in diverse languages, increases understanding and awareness of topics such as the NDIS. For a number of participants, disability is taboo, something to be ashamed of, and misunderstood. There is a layer of translation that exists prior to accepting written information. MRCN has, for a number of years, been working with refugee communities to first understand what topics are, such as health care, and preventative health. With this, we have gained insight that it is not sufficient to just provide information in multiple languages. For a large majority of CALD participants, there is a level of translation that is required to first debunk their understanding of or build their understanding of information relating to their health and wellbeing. It is suggested that NDIA should partner locally with organisations to ask for supporting in the distribution of key messages, rather than just produce more written material in several languages. What this also acknowledges, is that a large number of people arriving in Australia, don't have literacy in their first language. In addition to these points, MRCN has acknowledged that translation of documents and information is still only occurring in the 10 most common languages and dialects, making information inaccessible for a number of CALD communities.

Recommendation

NDIA should seek trusted and established CALD specific community partners to help deliver messages to key language groups. Regionally, CALD and migrant agencies have a greater understanding about the dynamics and needs of their local communities, which has the potential to increase NDIA's ability to engage.

Priority 5: Enhance cultural competency within the NDIA and our Partners in the Community

Action 5.1: Multicultural awareness training

The CALD Strategy Progress Report references 52% of NDIA staff having completed compulsory training by February 2021. Given that this progress report was completed in July, more current statistics would be beneficial for CALD providers.

MRCN staff are regularly raising awareness of NDIA planners and staff around multicultural concerns. As previously stated, MRCN's concern is that training is too generic, that it does not provide the staff with the information they need to undertake their role. There is a lack of understanding the complexities faced by CALD participants, particularly those from refugee backgrounds. When decisions are being made, culture is not being considered to have an impact on the functional capacity of the individual, and in a large number of cases, the capacity of parents of children living with disability. MRCN has found that parents of children living with disability from certain CALD backgrounds, need greater capacity building in order to be able to support their child attend appointments, engage with schools, understand information, transport a child with additional needs, and navigate mainstream services that are also available to help, as well as English proficiency. Yet these families are given the same amount of funding as a parent who knows what services are available, has access to transport, speaks English and has a greater support network.

In summary

The CALD Strategy progress for Tasmania, from MRCN's perspective, is not in line with other areas of Australia. Tasmanian CALD NIDS providers have felt very little engagement and impact in relation to our CALD communities. As MRCN is the largest specialist CALD NDIS provider in Tasmania, there is a feeling that not enough has been done in this space, and a greater body of work needs to be done prior to the expiration of the CALD specific ILC grants in operation. Once the ILC grants are no longer available, all of the work the ILCs have done to meet the need that the strategy has outlined, will fall through the cracks. There are still many people from CALD communities to need access to the scheme into the future. Having ILCs with a CALD focus in place, will enable future participants to have the same level of support to access the services, as the current CALD communities.

Yours faithfully

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES MANAGER