



## Assyrian Australian Association

### Assyrian Resource Centre

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The Assyrian Australian Association – Assyrian Resource Centre

### ***Supplementary Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade on the Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia***

Following further community consultations, the Assyrian Resource Centre would like to make a Submission supplementary to the one already provided to the Senate Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade on the Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia. Please find the responses to the Inquiry Terms of Reference below:

***What do you think about the support offered to Assyrian community associations and similar organisations, including government grants and other funding? Did the organisations in Assyrian community receive enough support? Were the right things supported? If we did not receive enough support and if the right projects were not supported, what should be supported?***

The Assyrian Australian Association has been in receipt of Settlement Grants for a very long time and we are grateful for this funding. We are particularly excited to be in receipt of the new Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS)<sup>1</sup> funding as the Consortium Lead of a Consortium made up of other organisations working with Syrian and Iraqi communities (Chaldean League, Antiochian Diocese and Armenian Resource Centre). This has enabled us to share our extensive knowledge of the settlement sector and support needs of the new arrivals within their first 5 years of settlement.

Assyrian Australian Association is also an Approved Proposing Organisation with the Community Support Program.<sup>2</sup> This has enabled us to enhance access to Australian humanitarian protection to those in need as well as facilitate wide community support for new arrivals. Our extensive connections with Iraqi and Syrian businesses have enabled us to secure 150 jobs for those who arrived under this scheme.

We appreciate the funding and support received from the Commonwealth Government in the settlement area. However, Assyrian community members require other services we are well placed to deliver. Further, there are many refugees and humanitarian arrivals who require support well beyond the initial 5 years settlement period. This is due to the level of trauma many of our community members have suffered and normal life cycle challenges which can impede settlement process. We are particularly concerned about the challenges faced by our seniors and young people.

For the seniors, it is a common occurrence that they revert to their first language as they age; and that the experience of torture and trauma has potential to expedite the ageing process.

<sup>1</sup> <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/sets-program>

<sup>2</sup> <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/refugee-and-humanitarian-program/community-support-program/approved-proposing-organisations>

This particular group requires trauma informed and culturally safe services.<sup>34</sup> Cultural elements in aged care service delivery have been emphasised by many stakeholders who engaged with our organisation and span from culturally appropriate food, access to Assyrian bi-lingual staff and Assyrian interpreters, service design to in-depth understanding of the cultural and spiritual frameworks associated with the ageing process. These cultural elements need to be understood and catered for by aged care services existing within the context of Australian multicultural society. Due to our cultural knowledge and expertise, the Assyrian Australian Association would be well placed to deliver aged care services to older Assyrian – both home-based and residential care. However, we require funding and support to deliver this. Our community has professionals required to deliver such services including nurses, chefs and doctors. All Assyrian Churches support seniors groups and they can provide pastoral care support.

As for young people, there are issues faced by those who are new arrivals, as well as those who were born in Australia but suffer from the impacts of transgenerational transmission of trauma. Both of those groups face unique issues and require relevant support. We have obtained youth funding in the past but it was usually 12-month funding with lack of continuity. Assyrian young people need a wrap-around, long-term, sustainable and intensive support.

Furthermore, we would like to seek Government support for Assyrian community and organisations nationally. Currently we are the only SETS funded Assyrian organisation nationwide. There are high numbers of Assyrians settling in Melbourne and in Brisbane and they require the culturally-appropriate support and bridging to mainstream services that can only be provided by an Assyrian organisation. Funding for Assyrian organisations would also facilitate capacity development for Assyrian community nationally. We have delivered some services in Melbourne (both face-to-face and virtually) and would consider opening an office there if adequate funding was provided.

To ensure cultural maintenance and embrace our Assyrian identity as a part of multicultural Australia, our community also requires recognition and inclusion of Assyrian language as a High School Certificate subject; as well as support for establishment of community language schools in Assyrian in areas other than Sydney. I believe such school is about to commence in Melbourne but we would like to see this in all States that have settled Assyrians.

Assyrian language is an Aramaic language within the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. It is an ancient language and a currently endangered cultural treasure relevant to the whole of humanity.<sup>56</sup> Australia has a unique opportunity to contribute to preservation of our language and culture, thus benefiting the world and communities beyond our own.

In relation to language, unfortunately many services still use Arabic interpreters with Assyrian clients. They may not be aware that the use of Arabic is not only linguistically problematic but it also has the potential to act as a trigger of past-trauma and cause undue stress for the clients. Finally, it is essential that libraries in the areas settled by Assyrians proactively pursue acquisition of Assyrian language collections. Assyrians suffered the

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<sup>3</sup> Key, H. (2018). Foundations of Trauma-Informed Care: An Introductory Primer. LeadingAge Maryland Baltimore, MD.

<sup>4</sup> The Healing Foundation. (2018). Submission to Aged Care Workforce Strategy. Retrieved from <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/submissions/Documents/public-submissions/AWF.001.04106.04.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap>

<sup>6</sup> [https://web.archive.org/web/20110717071922/http://www.jaas.org/edocs/v18n2/Parpola-identity\\_Article%20-Final.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20110717071922/http://www.jaas.org/edocs/v18n2/Parpola-identity_Article%20-Final.pdf)

systematic Arabisation and the Kurdification of their culture in their homeland aimed at effacing their identity, which was backed by the Baath Party and current Iraq Government, and restrictions were imposed upon their languages, cultural expression and right to self-identification. This pattern is repeated in Australia by providing Arabic interpreters to Assyrian community members and categorising Assyrians as Arabs, which contributes to erasure of one of the oldest cultures on Earth.

***What safety concerns does Assyrian community have? How can Australian Government strengthen the protection and resilience of vulnerable groups in Assyrian community? Which groups are most vulnerable?***

There are a number of populations within Assyrian community we are concerned about including:

1. Young people – many who have arrived as refugees have lost parents particularly fathers and may lack positive male role models in their lives. They may also face the challenges of dealing with the impact of severe trauma, process of cultural transition, engagement with Australian education system, family conflict, exposure to prejudice and discrimination and other practical settlement challenges such as housing and low income. This all occurs during the time in their lives when they seek peer groups and negotiate their identity. We are concerned that some of Assyrian young people may be vulnerable to being recruited by organised crime and dropping out of school. They need specific culturally appropriate support for both themselves and their families.<sup>7 8</sup>

Assyrian young people born in Australia may not face settlement challenges but they also struggle with issues of identity, prejudice and transgenerational transmission of trauma which is not well understood, acknowledged or spoken about directly.<sup>9 10 11 12</sup> The impact of this form of trauma can result in mental health challenges, struggles with identity and use of unhelpful coping mechanisms.

It is essential that Assyrian community is funded to support our young people – both first generation and those born in Australia. Trained Youth Workers, access to educational support, activities that build social connections and allow young people to explore the challenges they face in a safe space are all crucial to this endeavour. Assyrian young people need tailored employment support programs, crime prevention programs, women's programs, community volunteer programs, creation of round table discussion around youth issues led by young people, peer support and mentoring where they can explore social norms and gender roles in a safe and supportive environment.

According to the 2016 census, Assyrian ancestry population compared to the total population shows that in 2016 there was a higher proportion of people in the younger age groups (under 15) and a lower proportion of people in the older age groups (65+). Overall, 21.6% of the population was aged between 0 and 15, and 10.8% were aged 65 years and over, compared with 18.5% and 16.2% respectively for the New South Wales total population.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Paterson, N. (2019), *How young people from humanitarian backgrounds are settling in Australia*, <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/2019/03/21/how-young-people-humanitarian-backgrounds-are-settling-australia>

<sup>8</sup> Bansel et al (2016), *Young Newly Arrived Migrants and Refugees in Australia*, Western Sydney University

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/267060>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.psychiatryinvestigation.org/journal/view.php?number=1010>

<sup>11</sup> Onver, C (2017), *The Psychological Legacy of the Sayfo: An Intergenerational Transmission of Fear and Distrust*, Berghahn Books

<sup>12</sup> Gaunt et al (2019), *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo – The Genocide Against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*, Berghahn Books

<sup>13</sup> <https://multiculturalnsw.id.com.au/multiculturalnsw/ancestry-by-age-and-gender?COIID=224>

2. Assyrian seniors – the issues they face and their needs have been identified in the response to the previous question.
3. Assyrian women exposed to domestic and family violence. This is a complex issue associated with multiple causative factors. However, it is essential to support women attempting to leave dangerous situations and provide them with all essential trauma informed and culturally safe services; but also work with Assyrian men, provide them with support and educate them about different and new approaches to family relationships.<sup>1415</sup>
4. There are Assyrian community members who are currently in correctional services custody (both Juvenile Justice and adult correctional facilities). They are often disconnected from their families and communities due to stigma and shame. They need support from their community and AAA would be able to explore a volunteer visiting scheme should we receive funding to do so.

***What prevents the full participation of Assyrian community in Australia's democratic and social institutions and what can be done to make sure we can participate fully?***

Assyrian community in areas of high settlement has developed excellent relationships with our political representatives on all levels of Government. Some of our community members have been elected to represent us in NSW State Parliament as well as local Councils. We are involved with various political parties and many of us had access to participation in relevant democratic institutions.

However, we would like to:

1. See establishment of a Parliamentary Friendship Group on a Federal Level
2. Ensure regular consultations with Assyrian organisations and community by all levels of Government when decisions are made relevant to our community.
3. Enhanced employment services for our community members that would lead to jobs and better economic and social participation. According to 2016 Census, unemployment rate amongst NSW residents with Assyrian ancestry was 10% compared to the 6.3% for all NSW.<sup>16</sup>
4. Enhanced English language teaching services that allows our community members to obtain functional English without being restricted by the number of hours available. According to 2016 Census 20.1% of NSW residents with Assyrian Ancestry reported speaking English not well or not at all.<sup>17</sup> This number is likely to have increased taking into account significant number of new arrivals since 2016.
5. Establishment of a Youth Round Table, to discuss, plan and implement youth related matters. This may include settlement, community connections, healing and mental health.

***How can communication and partnership be improved between government and Assyrian community?***

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<sup>14</sup> Dr Alissar El-Murr (2018), *Intimate partner violence in Australian refugee communities - Scoping review of issues and service responses*, Australian Institute of Family Studies

<sup>15</sup> Murdolo & Quiazon (2016), *Key issues in working with men from immigrant and refugee communities in preventing violence against women*, White Ribbon Australia

<sup>16</sup> <https://multiculturalnsw.id.com.au/multiculturalnsw/ancestry-by-employment?COIID=224>

<sup>17</sup> <https://multiculturalnsw.id.com.au/multiculturalnsw/ancestry-by-employment?COIID=224>

Our community relies on organisations such as AAA for this communication and partnership building. However, the engagement usually occurs via Immigration Department and largely relates to settlement issues. We would like to see collaboration and communication across all portfolios relevant to our community occurring on a regular basis – for example employment, education, health and small business. Assyrian organisations have a lot to offer in the settlement realm. However, our knowledge and grassroots connections extend far beyond the narrow limit of settlement sector.

Assyrian organisations form the major bridge between Australian institutions and wider Assyrian diaspora. This role must be acknowledged and promoted on all levels of Australian Government. Our cultural and community knowledge is essential to policy making in multicultural Australia, and we are happy to share this knowledge for the benefit of our community.

***Are there any other issues relevant to our community you would like to raise with Australian Government?***

There are three additional issues identified as challenges by our community

1. Housing – prices in rental market in Sydney continue to cause a shift further West. This is challenging for many of our community members as Assyrian Churches and Clubs are largely located around Fairfield. Further, according to 2016 Census, the dominant Assyrian household size was 4 people when compared to 2 in all NSW.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, households with 6 persons made up for 21.2% of Assyrian ancestry population when compared with 9.8% for all NSW; households of 5 persons made up 22.1% for Assyrian ancestry residents and 13.6% for all NSW. Larger family size necessitates larger and more expensive properties.

2. Mental Health – particularly for older people and their families who may not understand the complex interaction of mental health issues and dementia or know how to access relevant services.

Additionally, we need mental health programs to support parents to support young people, and develop an understanding of adaptation and acculturation of young people and impact on well being

3. NDIS – Assyrian community members find the NDIS system very complex and many of our community members cannot negotiate it without our help – both to access NDIS support as well as use their NDIS packages.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://multiculturalnsw.id.com.au/multiculturalnsw/ancestry-by-household-size?COIID=224>



website: [www.assyrianaustralian.org.au](http://www.assyrianaustralian.org.au)

I pay my respect and acknowledge the **Cabrogal** people as the traditional owners of the land which I work & live on