

Parliamentary Settlement Enquiry Response

This paper is compiled on behalf of Mount Druitt Ethnic Communities Agency (MECA)

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This report addresses the following point in the terms of reference:

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

Background:

Australia has a long history of supporting human rights and protecting those who come to our shores fleeing persecution. When they arrive, humanitarian entrants make significantly positive economic, social and civic contributions to Australian society. However, in recent times there has been increasing coverage of a position that denounces refugees as being unworthy of assistance or as a threat to the Australian way of life. This misguided perception has led to the presumption that settlement services bear the responsibility for all of the social woes that are attributed to anyone of non-Anglo heritage. This submission will contend that settlement services, in their current form, promote positive settlement outcomes for refugees, despite the need for improvements in some areas. Finally, this submission will suggest solutions for current deficits in the system.

It is important to note that settlement services only support refugees and holders of humanitarian visas who are within their first five years in Australia. Settlement services are not funded to provide assistance to other migrant visa streams or second generation migrants. These groups do not have access to the casework, orientation services and social inclusion programs offered to the target population described above. This submission will only address the nature of outcomes of settlement services as outlined in their remit with funding bodies.

As settlement is a complex process in which a range of factors impact upon the likelihood of success, it is imperative that any conflation of issues is avoided. Specifically, it is vital not to confuse issues relating to settlement with issues of structural discrimination and disadvantage. Whilst settlement services run a wide range of programing aimed at supporting new arrivals in their transition into Australian society, these service cannot conquer the embedded racism and exclusionary practices that still permeate pockets of our society. These practices can lead to feelings of social exclusion and isolation within refugee communities. Occasionally, these feelings can lead those who experience them to further remove themselves from a society that they deem does not welcome or accept them. This can manifest as anti-social behaviour. In order to combat these feelings of marginalization, settlement services offer information sessions introducing new arrivals to Australian culture, including aspects of discrimination and racism that they may experience and a range of successful social inclusion programs. However, these programs go little way to ameliorating the discriminatory effects which result from a social system that, at times, disadvantages those who do are deemed to be outsiders, whilst simultaneously serving to advantage the dominant group. As a result, it is essential that any social disharmony perceived to be borne from this social exclusion, is not mistakenly attributed to the failing of a system not designed to singlehandedly solve such structural issues.

Initiatives:

Settlement services, in their current iteration, promote positive settlement outcomes for refugees. As a member of the New South Wales Settlement Partnership, Mount Druitt Ethnic Communities Agency (MECA) provides casework and social inclusion programs to refugees within their first five years of arrival. These programs included the REvitalise - Refugee Volunteering Program and the Girl SKILS self-empowerment program. It is important to note that, whilst these programs are specific to MECA, many other programs with similar goals are run by settlement providers across the country. These are just examples of the vehicles through which successful settlement is achieved.

Through the REvitalise program, Mount Druitt Ethnic Communities Agency (MECA) aimed to provide volunteering and training opportunities to young refugees in Mount Druitt for the purpose of improving job readiness and community connectedness within target population. These volunteering opportunities seek to improve the skill level of participants and enhance their ability to engage in other forms of social and economic participation. The program enables MECA to improve and promote volunteering participation, and increased diversity within the volunteering sector.

This initiative saw a wide range of positive outcomes for program's 42 participants. Those who completed the program received training and skills development support which would facilitate their future participation in the workforce. Program participants were also able to develop their personal and professional networks. This program has also been presented as an exemplar in the field of resettlement at The Australian and New Zealand Third Sector Research conference held at Sydney University in 2016. Researchers from Flinders University have also assessed the REvitalise program as part of a study into best practice within the volunteering sector.

MECA's Girl SKILS (Smarts, Know-How, Intelligence, Leadership, and Strength) program targets young women of a refugee background between the ages of 14 and 16, living in Mount Druitt. The program specifically seeks to include young people who may have demonstrated difficulty with settlement, experienced social tension or expressed feelings of exclusion and isolation. These young women are provided with education and mentoring that focuses on the development of social and emotional literacy by enhancing the key social and emotional skills. Girl SKILS graduates are the beneficiaries of a nine week program that supports the development of lifelong interpersonal skills. By completing this program each participant demonstrates that they can find their inner confidence, respect others, understand their emotions and promote healthy relationships. One of the participants expressed her gratitude at being involved in the program and stated that "the program had given me such great confidence". The development of 'soft' interpersonal skills enabled program attendees to improve their communication skills, interpersonal problem solving skills, negotiation skills and their ability to deescalate volatile situations. Overall, this program teaches young women how to manage interpersonal conflict with a view to ameliorating some of the social issues that they may be experiencing. As a result, positive impact of this program was also felt within the families of the participants and the wider community.

Issues/ Recommendations:

The current process of refugee resettlement requires improvement in some areas. Specifically, new arrivals have inconsistent access to mainstream services. In addition to this, there are significant deficits in the current level of community engagement with new arrivals, as individuals, and in the settlement process, as a whole. Providing settlement services requires specialised knowledge and experience. Settlement services are usually the first point through which refugees' access mainstream services and these new arrivals have specific and distinct needs of services providers.

However, often mainstream services are ill equipped to manage these complex requirements. Settlement providers work hard to partner, collaborate with, and educate mainstream services on working with refugees. However, at times, the client often gets shunted back and forth between settlement services and mainstream providers. In some instances this continues long after the individual ceases to be a 'new arrival'. The result of which can be disjointed care, mixed messages regarding service responsibility and poor or absent service provision. This is especially problematic for the most vulnerable, including those of limited English ability, the elderly, and children. Dramatically, service provision and access to mainstream services can inhibit the social and economic inclusion process and reduce an individual capacity for independence. Therefore, greater emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of providing specialist care within mainstream services.

The lack of broader community engagement in the settlement of refugees is also a significant issue. At present settlement is primarily delivered by non-governmental organisations and charities that are funded through various settlement grant programs. Programing is driven by the organisations and the need to meet Key Performance Indicators and benchmarks specified by funding bodies. Whilst these service do provide successful social inclusion programs, there are obvious limitations to the type of social inclusion assistance that can be provided by any one organisation. Specifically, this method of social inclusion is often based on the needs of groups, rather than individuals. This can lead to the needs of some group members going unmet. In addition, settlement is an exceptionally personal process; some need more support than others. In order to participate in settlement, mainstream community members generally must formally volunteer with a settlement service or charity. This can be a daunting prospect and may present a barrier for interested community members and their engagement in the settlement of new arrivals. This indicates that a mechanism through which community members and refugees can forge relationships, independent of formal settlement programing, is required.

In order to solve a number of the issues highlighted above, MECA proposes an innovative technology based solution. Circle Humanity is an online platform that connects individuals and community groups. It allows individuals to offer support and assistance to new arrivals, without the encumbrance of bureaucratic intervention. This system encourages the development of personal connections between refugees and community members. The result of which is the effective and durable social and economic inclusion of new arrivals into existing communities. This platform will capitalise on the good will within the community in order to provide a social safety net to new arrivals. It will support a number of the features that are utilised by social networking sites like Facebook/LinkedIn. However, the point of difference, between those sites and this platform, is the target group and the overall purpose. This site and mobile application will be dedicated to strengthening the relationships between new arrivals and the community. Through the mobile application, we are seeking to support co-operation between businesses, organisations, and communities to create that grass-roots systems that best meet needs of our new arrivals. This social media platform will work towards eliminating any structural and systematic deficits by presenting a more diversified and community-based method of communication.