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**ALBURY WODONGA  
MULTICULTURAL RESOURCE CENTRE Inc.**

**P.O. Box 853 Albury N.S.W. 2640**

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Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

**Re : INQUIRY INTO INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
AUSTRALIA'S REGIONAL AREAS**

**About Albury Wodonga**

- ◆ Albury-Wodonga is a major inland growth centre on the Hume Highway between Melbourne and Sydney/Canberra
- ◆ It is located on the border of New South Wales and Victoria
- ◆ The regional population is 136,085 persons
- ◆ The percentage of overseas born people is 11.2%
- ◆ The percentage of people of non-English speaking background is 7%
- ◆ Large scale immigration settlement began post World War II with the establishment of the Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre
- ◆ The largest groups of non-English speaking background are German (906), Dutch (753) and people from the former Yugoslavian Republic (518)
- ◆ Recently arrived migrants and refugees are mainly from Laos (260 - according to community survey), the Philippines (221), the former Yugoslavian Republic and Sri Lanka
- ◆ Since 1996 the number of arrivals from the Middle Eastern countries has also risen considerably.

**About the Albury-Wodonga Multicultural Resource Centre Inc. (MRC)**

- ◆ The Albury Wodonga Multicultural Resource Centre was established in 1990 in order to meet a void in the provision of services to the local NESB community, and plays a key role in supporting migrants and refugees who arrive in our region
- ◆ The establishment of the MRC was made possible by funding from the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs under the Grant-in-Aid Scheme. The initial funding enabled the MRC to employ a part-time Migrant Social Welfare Worker
- ◆ We have grown; today we have a full time Community Settlement Services worker, two full time Rural Information Campaign workers, a part time Financial Manager and 30 Volunteers
- ◆ Since incorporation, the number of MRC financial members has increased from 37 in 1993 to 180 in 1999
- ◆ The AWMRC provides a range of services designed to meet identified needs of migrants and promotes public awareness and acceptance. Since its establishment the MRC has concentrated its activities in the following areas:
  - Provision of settlement services
  - Promotion of community harmony and tolerance
  - Community Development activities

### **Issues of Concern in the Albury Wodonga Region**

#### ◆ **Government push to encourage migrants to settle in rural areas**

The Albury Wodonga Multicultural Resource Centre fully supports the initiative of the Government to encourage migrants to settle in rural regions. However, in order for this policy to succeed, the Government needs to commit resources to assist with the development of support systems and infrastructure in regional areas. In order for migrants and refugees to settle successfully in rural regions they need to have available to them easily accessible, appropriate and culturally sensitive services. Services such as Multicultural Resource Centres are needed to assist in the settlement of newcomers. These need to receive adequate financial support to enable them to function efficiently and effectively and to enable them to be responsive to the needs of the clients.

#### ◆ **Public Transport**

Public transport is a key factor in ensuring that people have access to services. In regional areas public transport is not adequate, and lack of adequate public transport is the main single factor increasing the isolation of rural people. Public transport needs to be available in more areas, the services need to be more frequent and the hours need to be extended. For example, people living in Wodonga or Thurgoona, cannot go to Albury at night by public transport because there is no late night bus service available.

#### ◆ **Health Services**

The closure of country hospitals is of great concern to rural residents as is the difficulty of attracting General Practitioners to small rural towns. The Government should take urgent steps to address the issue of recognition of the qualifications of overseas qualified medical practitioners. This issue is particularly urgent at the moment in the Goulburn Valley but affects many other regional areas. In Albury Wodonga we have a Lao community many of whom have limited English language skills. We also have a Lao qualified GP who has been unable to pass his examination to receive recognition in Australia due to inability to access any bridging courses in this region.

◆ **Communications**

Telecommunications are a major means of communication for rural people and businesses. The cost of telecommunications in the regional areas is excessive. In order to provide equitable access to communication for rural people the cost of mobile telephone calls should be reduced. Also there is an urgent need to increase mobile phone access. In this region there are many pockets very close to the Albury Wodonga city which do not yet have mobile phone coverage.

Video conferencing facilities are an alternative way to provide some services to regional areas. This facility should be more widely adopted by Government departments in order to extend the areas they can service successfully. For example, the provision of interpreting services through teleconferencing facilities should be adopted more widely. Internet access should be encouraged by the provision of discounted rates for rurally isolated people as this can be a very accessible alternative form of accessing information.

◆ **Education**

Access to education is also affected by regulations governing access to school bus services which state that in order to access free school bus services students need to be enrolled at the appropriate school for that zone. This practice can sometimes be discriminatory towards people who wish to enrol at a different school and then have to pay for transport. This affects students in that not all schools in rural areas teach all subjects. For example, a student living in Tallangatta may wish to study a subject that is only taught at a High School in Wodonga.

◆ **Interpreter Services**

Interpreter Services are vital for the successful settlement of people of non-English speaking backgrounds to this region, yet are not available as freely as in the capital cities. The Riverina Institute of TAFE and the Illawarra Health Care Interpreter Service have been working together to increase the number of accredited interpreters available in the region.

The presence of the Department of Immigration's Translating and Interpreting Service in this region should be improved.

The provision of interpreting services by video-link facility should be extended.

◆ **Productive Diversity**

This region has many large and small employers who employ migrants and refugees. We support and encourage this trend and feel that more employers should be trained in the benefits of employing people of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

◆ **Multicultural Resource Centres**

Multicultural Resource Centres are an integral link between Government services, the private sector and migrants. MRC's facilitate the Government in building better relationships with migrant communities and in establishing conduits to carry out consultations and receive feedback. MRC's assist in the successful settlement of migrants in regional areas, thus increasing the use of Government services, boosting the economy and increasing spending. MRC's are also essential in order to enable migrants to develop strong networks and access information and support. The work of MRC's is important and should be recognised as such and be supported.

**If you have any enquiries regarding this submission please contact:**

Marita Quaglio  
Vice Chairperson  
Albury Wodonga Multicultural Resource Centre

Phone : (02) 6058 2804  
Fax ; (02) 6058 2851  
E-mail : marita.quaglio@tafensw.com.au