

# Forum on the Settlement of Syrian and Iraqi Refugees

## Summary Report



April 2016



## **INTRODUCTION**

In September 2015, the Commonwealth Government announced that it would take in 12,000 Syrian and Iraqi humanitarian entrants from refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

In the context of the announcement, Metro Assist and Settlement Services International (SSI) undertook to organise a forum in South West Sydney to bring together local and regional organisations to consider what support could be offered to humanitarian entrants settling in the region.

On Thursday 3 March 2016, a Forum on Syrian and Iraqi Refugee Settlement was held in Bankstown as a joint initiative of SSI and Metro Assist. The Forum brought together around 100 participants from over 30 agencies representing government, local services, schools, religious and civil society organisations in discussion around key settlement issues that will confront this particular cohort of Syrian and Iraqi humanitarian entrants.

The workshops focussed on the following issues:

1. English language
2. short and longer term housing
3. education
4. employment and training
5. health and mental health
6. parenting and family relations
7. young people
8. isolation and social engagement
9. immigration issues

SSI and Metro Assist are pleased to present this summary report to Prof Peter Shergold, NSW Coordinator-General for Refugee Resettlement.



## ATTENDEES

The objective of the forum was to enable local service providers to come together and consider how they might be able to contribute to the refugee resettlement effort.

Services Involved	Type of Service/s
Afford Employment	Employment
Al Miniah Charitable Association	Family, education, welfare and settlement
Anglicare	Family, health, mental health, welfare, settlement
Australians for Syria Association (AFSA)	Welfare, settlement, health/mental health
Benevolent Society	Family, health and mental health
Canterbury City Council	Government
Creating Links	Family services
NSW Dept Family and Community Services	Family services
Commonwealth Dept of Human Services	Income support, youth, health and mental health
NSW Dept of Premier and Cabinet	Government
Good Start Early Learning	Education
Hampden Park Public School (HPPS)	Education
Lakemba Public School	Education
Law Access NSW	Law
Life Without Barriers	Settlement
Lebanese Muslim Association	Youth
MTC Australia	English and Employment
Multicultural Disability Advocacy Assoc	Disability services
Multicultural NSW	Government
Navitas (Bankstown)	Education
Navitas English (Parramatta)	Education, welfare and settlement
NSW Police Force	Police
Punchbowl School & Community Centre	Education and family services
Red Cross	Settlement
Refugee Health	Health
Schools as Community Centres	Education and families
Sir Joseph Banks High School	Education
St. Michael's Anglican Church	Community support
Sydney South West Area Health Service	Youth, health, mental Health
TAFE (South West Sydney Institute)	Education
Warakirri College	Education
Youth Health	Youth
<b>32 organisations represented</b>	

## WORKSHOP SUMMARIES

Workshops were held based on key issues that would most likely face this new intake of humanitarian entrants. Three questions were put in each of the workshops:

1. What are the key issues to address in this area?
2. What services are currently offered?
3. What type of responses and actions are needed?

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE

### 1. What are the key issues to address in this area?

- AMEP courses do not always cater for age grouping and younger people may not find information or learning process for older people, is not relevant or appropriate to their needs and vice-versa.
- People often find it difficult to maintain continuity in AMEP because of work or other commitments.
- Some people lack the confidence to participate in classroom settings.
- Location and distance to where English courses are offered can be a barrier.
- Some people lack motivation which makes it difficult for other students.

### 2. What type of responses and actions needed?

- English classes should be established along age groupings and particular motivations such as employment and further studies. In this way like-minded students are not slowed down by those with a more casual approach to learning English.
- English conversation clubs established for people who find it difficult to engage in more formal learning. This could be supported through volunteers.
- Engaging parents in English learning based on their children's schooling can result in stronger parental engagement and improve their ability to support children in their schoolwork.
- Timely access to childcare to allow parents to engage in English learning.
- Helping young children to learn English and build confidence through play and preschool.
- Explore the ways of engaging people in English learning in local communities such as: Welcome dinners, mentoring and volunteering - connect to community, faith groups, men's and women's groups.

### 3. Services offered

- Adult Migrant Education Programme (AMEP) – 510 hours
- Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) Programme – focussed on employment
- Conversation Clubs – through community organisations, council libraries etc.
- TAFE offers opportunities for free English language courses
- Some organisations have volunteer positions

## HOUSING

### 1. What are the key issues to address in this area?

- Affordability –significant rent increases lock out low income earners and many don't have bond and rent in advance.
- Social housing is an unrealistic option.
- Housing stock is limited and poor quality. Strong competition forces people to outer areas which carry 'other' costs (ie; transport).
- Substandard accommodation - Inappropriate accommodation and overcrowding.
- Limited knowledge of the market and system – language barrier impedes communication with agents and landlords, property searches, filling forms, understanding contracts and seeking redress.
- Lack of rental history and documentation.
- Unrealistic expectations by refugees and new migrants.
- Lack of knowledge around tenants' rights and responsibilities around maintaining rental properties.
- Discrimination against low income earners, refugees and racial backgrounds.

### 2. What type of responses and actions needed?

- Specialist housing workers to support people to navigate the housing market and process, including education on tenants' rights and responsibilities, financial assistance (ie; bond loans), transitional and supported housing.
- Brokerage and liaison to develop relationships with agents and landlords, establish head lease arrangements and partnerships with housing providers.
- Establish connections with community and faith groups, volunteers, housing cooperatives and local businesses to enhance English, education and employment.
- Transport maps for new arrivals.
- Better coordination between government services, local state and federal.
- Linking with poverty alleviation services

### 3. Services offered

- Tenant Advocacy and Advisory Services in different regions – provide education and support to tenants (Metro Assist has one)
- Specialist settlement and housing workers – provide immediate on-arrival housing to refugees, and support transition to longer term housing by negotiating with rental agencies (SSI and Metro Assist)
- Food donations
- Education around budgeting and financial counselling (Metro Assist, Anglicare)
- Training and employment pathways (JobActive, AMEP, TAFE/RTOs) Settlement workers facilitate community connections

## EDUCATION

### 1. What are the key issues to address in this area?

- Refugee parents will have limited or no knowledge of the school system in Australia; from early childhood, through primary, high school and post-school studies options.
- Parents are sometimes unable to engage or participate in school activities due to the language barrier, or because of their own educational limitations.
- There are varying levels of understanding of education pathways in terms of vocational and tertiary education; apprenticeships and traineeships.
- Parents sometimes discourage their sons and daughters from taking studies outside of school because they (parents) fear for the safety of their children (ie; catching public transport after hours to attend TAFE).

### 2. What type of responses and actions needed?

- Settlement services can do more to help parents understand the school system and how it operates; including what the schools' expectations are towards academic performance, participation etc.
- Schools provide a point of contact between parents and the system. Schools can work with local services to conduct conversation clubs and engage more directly with parents.
- Visits to high school, TAFE colleges and universities would help parents understand educational options for their children and could act as a catalyst in supporting their children through study and other school requirements.
- Help parents overcome their fears by getting them to accompany their child on public transport to TAFE.
- Structuring classes for older refugees who are currently placed in classes with younger students which can be embarrassing and demotivating for older students.

### 3. Services offered

- Schools as Community Centres (SACCs) program operates in a select number of public schools in the region, and provides some of the vital contact and engagement with parents.
- School counsellors can assist in addressing particular issues which impact on the child.
- SSI also has a Community Hubs program through a number of schools.
- Distance learning is also offered through TAFE, and many universities are moving towards an online learning environment.



Client voice

## EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

### 1. What are the key issues to address in this area?

- Non-recognition of overseas skills and qualifications.
- Costs associated with assessment of prior learning, translation of qualifications.
- Barriers sometimes posed by industry associations.
- Lack of 'soft' skills – English and local knowledge.
- Discrimination on the part of employers towards people of other cultures (accents etc)
- Lack of transport for people who may be working shiftwork and the cost of transport or getting a driver's license.
- Impact of other social issues (mental health, housing etc) on employment or training placements.

### 2. What type of responses and actions needed?

- Fairer, less costly method of meeting requirements for skills recognition and overseas qualifications – paid traineeships and employer incentives.
- Gap training that is affordable to bring people up to local standards.
- Stronger connections with employers around the benefits of employing migrants and refugees.
- Pathways into related industries and careers.
- Local professionals mentoring for refugees with similar professional interests.
- Affordable ways of getting a driver's license.
- More integrated settlement-employment-training framework.

### 3. Services offered

- SkillME project at Metro Assist – helping migrants negotiate getting their skills and qualifications recognised, and getting people into entry level qualifications.
- SSI's IGNITE program helping refugee entrepreneurs with information about start-ups.
- TAFE (South West Sydney Institute) Recognition of Prior Learning and assessment of qualifications.
- Traineeships through a number of corporate entities (although this is limited to certain business sectors).



*Professor Shergold working the crowd*

## HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

### 1. What are the key issues to address in this area?

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Anxiety arising from separation from family and loved ones, making adjustments to a new culture, language, shelter and financial security.
- Ongoing sense of grief and loss arising from dislocation and migration experience.
- Isolation and lack of social connections and networks.
- Challenges to traditional views can add to stress and anxiety, such as perceived gender roles which can lead to tensions, relationship breakdown and family violence.
- Limited self-understanding of mental health conditions and how they can be treated, and often there is resistance to seeing a psychologist.
- Single mothers face stigma and hold a sense of shame within their own community.
- Services sometimes lack sensitivity towards refugees and their experiences.
- Long waiting lists for public health services including disability services.
- Refugees have a limited knowledge of services.

### 2. What type of responses and actions needed?

- More understanding and awareness around refugees and their needs, across all services including schools.
- Stronger social and cultural inclusion at a local level and community's to take a more nurturing role through activities (Men's sheds, art therapy, etc).
- Create greater awareness among refugee communities of mental health and wellbeing, and support services.
- Schools as key contact points to engage with families where services can work with school counsellors.
- Helping families and individuals in understanding changes in the social structure and local practices.

### 3. Services offered

- Services for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) specialise in refugee mental health.
- Growing number of counsellors specialising in trauma.
- Caseworkers in SSI and Metro Assist support clients through advocacy and casework, and facilitate community development.
- Metro Assist provides Complex Case Support (CCS) services.
- Range of mainstream services which are developing an expertise in working with refugees (health, legal, trauma, etc).
- Links with ethnic-specific services and organisations which can facilitate settlement and social engagement.
- Councils and other local agencies working to facilitate community engagement through festivals, events, conversation clubs, etc.
- GP networks and primary health providers, disability services.

## PARENTING AND FAMILY RELATIONS

### 1. What are the key issues to address in this area?

- Anxiety and emotional disorders resulting from separation
- Uncertainty around family reunion
- Lack of parenting skills, difficulties experienced by single parents
- Trauma experienced by parents and children
- Communication challenges, difficulties in self-expression
- Gender roles - cultural differences
- Lack of social connections and network
- Cultural blockages

### 2. What type of responses and actions needed?

- Support for family reunion
- Men's shed- men's group
- Breaking the social isolation- link families to their community
- Parenting support for dads
- Referral pathways to counselling and support for parents and children

### 3. Services offered

- Drum group for boys (Creating Links)
- Financial counselling and support
- Housing and tenancy support (Metro Assist)
- Immigration advice (Metro Assist)
- Working with schools - Teachers are able to meet with parents to discuss children's issues



*Looking for solutions*

## YOUTH

### 1. What are the key issues to address in this area?

- Navigating the education system and education pathways and transitions can be difficult for refugee youth.
- Recognition of overseas skills and qualifications is difficult and can be costly; often requiring retraining in that field of expertise.
- It is difficult to access employment because employers want people with local skills and experience.
- Young people struggle to adjust to life in Australia and it is sometimes difficult to access the right kind of support which can lead to a sense of exclusion and isolation.
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### 2. What type of responses and actions needed?

- There needs to be better access to, and awareness of, mental health services.
- More youth and community support projects are needed to engage young people.
- Improved support for refugee students in English learning within the secondary school system.

### 3. Services offered

- SSI and Metro Assist offer youth programs, as do a number of youth organisations in the Bankstown and broader region (Bankstown Youth Development Services, Bankstown Multicultural Youth Service, PCYC and others).
- TAFE offers a range of course for young people seeking careers.
- Intensive English Centres within some secondary schools.



*Starting out on a new life*

## ISOLATION, SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION

### 1. What are the key issues to address in this area?

- Refugees feel isolated, lonely and somewhat separated from the broader community.
- Lack of English and limited knowledge of the local area and services contributes to isolation.
- Trust of others is not immediate.

### 2. What type of responses and actions needed?

- Welcome Dinners held in locations with refugee populations to involve locals and neighbours.
- Establish conversation clubs/learning circles where people can get together and learn English in an informal setting.
- Match people with common interests and educational backgrounds – like ‘buddy’ system.
- Recruit more volunteers in the community who can teach English and Civics.

### 3. Services offered

- SSI provides orientation support to newly arrived refugees through the Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) program, as well as Community Kitchen.
- Metro Assist hosts a number of groups and activities where new migrants and refugees can come together in a social and friendly environment – sewing club.
- Welcome Dinners have taken place between different communities.



*Working through ideas*

## IMMIGRATION

### 4. What are the key issues to address in this area?

- Leaving one's country without proper and normal migration advice is a difficult and risky decision. There are different migration streams and the cost of engaging a migration agent or migration lawyer can be expensive.
- An applicant for refugee status must make the application outside of Australia in order to be recognised.
- They must be able to prove persecution and fear, which can be difficult to do in seeking a Protection Visa.

### 5. What type of responses and actions needed?

- Services and individuals should be aware that it is illegal to offer migration advice unless you are an accredited migration agent or migration lawyer through the Migration Agents Registration Authority (MARA).
- Information to refugees and services that there are some migration agents that provide pro-bono services, to which referrals can be directed.
- Organisations can in some circumstances sponsor an applicant.
- There is currently a Community Proposer pilot project, among certain services.

### 6. Services offered

- Metro Assist has a funded Migration Agent and there are no fees/charged associated with this service.

## CONCLUSION

The information provided through the issues-based workshops and general feedback from participants was extremely positive and demonstrated a strong desire to work in a coordinated fashion to support the settlement of this cohort of refugees.

Both SSI and Metro Assist have many years of practical experience in working with refugee communities and we are pleased to forward this report to the NSW Coordinator-General for Refugee Resettlement in the hope that the information provided is of use in the overall settlement planning. We would be pleased to remain engaged with any future efforts that might facilitate the coordination and effective settlement of refugees.

IMAGES

