

# Community Links Program

Mercy Refugee Service, Lewisham, Sydney, NSW

*This project also relates to:*

## Families

The Mercy Refugee Service, *Community Links Program*, trains volunteers from the community and connects them with refugee families or individuals. The program began in 1998 and currently has 50 active volunteers.

One full-time and one part-time project coordinator run the *Community Links Program* with funding from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Since its inception, the program has provided support to over 500 refugee families.

The program assists refugees once they have left the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (the Australian Government funded resettlement program that provides on-arrival support for refugees). Agencies such as Migrant Resource Centres, Anglicare's humanitarian counselling program, the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), and language centres refer refugees and humanitarian entrants, whom they consider vulnerable, for post IHSS assistance to the Mercy Refugee Service.

The *Community Links Program* works with vulnerable refugee and humanitarian arrivals with complex needs. This can include families that have come to Australia under the Women at Risk visa category, families experiencing barriers to settlement due to torture and trauma, and families settling in urban contexts after spending protracted periods in refugee camps. Isolation is also an indicator for being referred particularly where people are trying to sponsor family members to come to Australia. These clients face many difficulties including:

- health problems (both immediate and chronic issues)
- housing needs
- social isolation
- family reunion needs
- family breakdown

- education and employment needs
- area and transport orientation
- navigating complex bureaucratic systems.

The aims of the *Community Links Program* are to respond to the needs the client has identified and, in the process, mentor the client in independently gaining access to mainstream and specialist refugee services. Volunteers provide assistance in the settlement process through:

- facilitating self reliance in accessing education and employment options
- ensuring that clients are accessing proper health care
- supporting the most vulnerable in the community
- assisting people to link with mainstream and specialist services
- linking families with specialist/bilingual workers in mainstream and government departments
- assisting with document queries
- orientation to the local area and local transport
- focusing on strategies for independence and self-reliance.

## The program

Mercy Refugee Service was formally established in 1984 as part of the relief and development work of the Sisters of Mercy. The service trains volunteers from the community to work as Settlement Assistance Officers. Volunteers are recruited through the organisation's website, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the local press, at libraries and through community groups. Prospective volunteers are sent an interview pack then interviewed two to three weeks before training begins.

After conducting interviews, successful volunteer applicants attend 18 hours of training over two weekends. The training sessions cover modules such as the refugee journey, barriers to settlement, settlement services, the role of the volunteer, and cross-cultural communication.

The training session uses tools such as case studies, role-plays, videos and interactive exercises to equip volunteers with knowledge and strategies for working with refugee clients. Experienced volunteers also come in and share their stories with the group.

The volunteers are provided with bimonthly professional development sessions. In response to issues identified by volunteers through their reporting sheets, professional speakers are invited to address the session to respond to these particular issues. Guest speakers have included representatives from the Department of Fair Trading, Centrelink and STARTTS, as well as ethno-specific caseworkers.

Volunteers are matched with a family according to gender and place of residence. Once matched with a family, the volunteer visits that family once a week for up to five hours over a period of about six months. Volunteer activities include:

- familiarising families with public transport
- accompanying family members to appointments
- helping families negotiate with service providers
- assisting families to interact with private providers
- advocating for families where necessary
- providing psycho-social support
- helping clients to find appropriate accommodation.

Two excursions each year are arranged to allow volunteers and clients to come together as a group. Outings have been organised to the zoo, city parks and the aquarium. The outings are funded through donations from church groups.

## Achievements

The *Community Links Program* has provided support to more than 500 refugee families since its inception and currently has 50 active volunteers.

Over recent years there has been an increase in awareness in the community about refugee issues and in particular a concern in the community about the welfare of refugees and asylum seekers.

The *Community Links Program* allows interested people to be involved in a practical sense in assisting refugees settle in Australia.

The work of the volunteers is a personal exchange of experiences. Volunteers feel they are having a positive effect on the resettlement experience of refugees. Project coordinator, Melinda Hamman, said:

People want to meet the families and interact and get a good understanding of different cultures and the issues. It makes them feel they are making a positive impact on people's settlement process. The experience of being a volunteer is very tangible. You're out doing fieldwork and that's what appeals to a lot of people. They understand the commitment is very big and they're willing to sign up for that commitment because the experience is so personal and rewarding.

A recent volunteer achievement has been to help a young refugee client obtain a \$5000 scholarship to pay for her athletics training. She had been a professional athlete in her country of origin. With this financial support she hopes to train to participate in the Olympic Games.

## Challenges

The greatest challenge in this program is providing adequate support to the volunteers throughout their placement. Volunteers conduct weekly home visits and establish a rapport with the family that can cause a blurring of the line between a professional and a personal relationship. Volunteers need ongoing training, support and monitoring to ensure they set appropriate boundaries and this level of support can be difficult to sustain due to the limited capacity of busy project staff. This challenge has affected the number of active volunteers delivering the project.

## Key factors in the project's success

The success of this project has revolved around the provision of relevant, up-to-date and interactive training, strong reporting and monitoring mechanisms, good referral networks and a flexible approach by staff and volunteers responding to the needs of the refugees.

Over the years the *Community Links Program* has strengthened the volunteer training program by incorporating feedback received into the curriculum.

As the program has developed and the needs of clients have changed, staff have endeavoured to provide information and strategies that can directly assist the volunteer in their role.

Particular areas of focus have been:

- emphasising the importance of boundaries to ensure volunteers work within their project role and promote client self reliance
- stringent reporting and monitoring mechanisms, including reviews and evaluations of the placement
- providing opportunities for volunteers to participate in consultation sessions to form appropriate guidelines and policies for the project
- recognising the volunteers' contributions
- encouraging enthusiasm and commitment from the volunteers
- providing feedback about the positive impact the volunteer role has had on families collected through client evaluations and referring agency evaluations.

### Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

Volunteers need to have a very clear understanding of their job description and how their role works in a complementary fashion with other established service providers so they are better able to set boundaries, close the placement successfully and mitigate burnout.

It is vital to work closely with other agencies and referring bodies to ensure that families are being provided with every opportunity possible to establish themselves in the community, and there is a seamless delivery of support.

Volunteers can be isolated in their role. All visits are off site, either at the family's home or accompanying them to appointments. It is therefore essential to provide ongoing training throughout the year and informal meetings where volunteers meet and debrief to maintain their morale and commitment. It is vital to provide forums for volunteers to exchange information, raise issues, develop strategies, share stories and connect with one another.

### Contact details

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## Profile > Aisha and Mohamed

**Aisha and Mohamed** arrived in Australia with their seven children and Mohamed's sister in March 2006. The family is from the Beja clan and lived in Eastern Sudan near the Eritrean border. Mohamed speaks eight languages but is not literate.

The family left Sudan in 2002 to escape the war and travelled overland to Cairo in Egypt. They lived in the community until the Australian Government accepted them for resettlement.

The family was living in very difficult conditions in Cairo. There was no work available for the parents, no education for the children, and they had no means of subsistence. Mohamed said:

Everything is easier in Australia except I find the language very difficult. I want my kids to learn as much as they can in Australia.

**Helen O'Brien**, a volunteer, started visiting the family in December 2006. Her experience with the family was extremely positive. Helen spent 10 months with the family and finished her placement in October 2007. In this time Mohamed secured his learner's driving licence and started to seek employment. Aisha is still taking English classes and both are very active in their children's education pathways. Mohamed continued:

Helen has done so much for us and helped us out. I would recommend Mercy Refugee Service to my friends and relatives.

photo > Aisha, Mahir, Moataz, Mohamed, Montasir, Mayadar and volunteer, Helen O'Brien



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