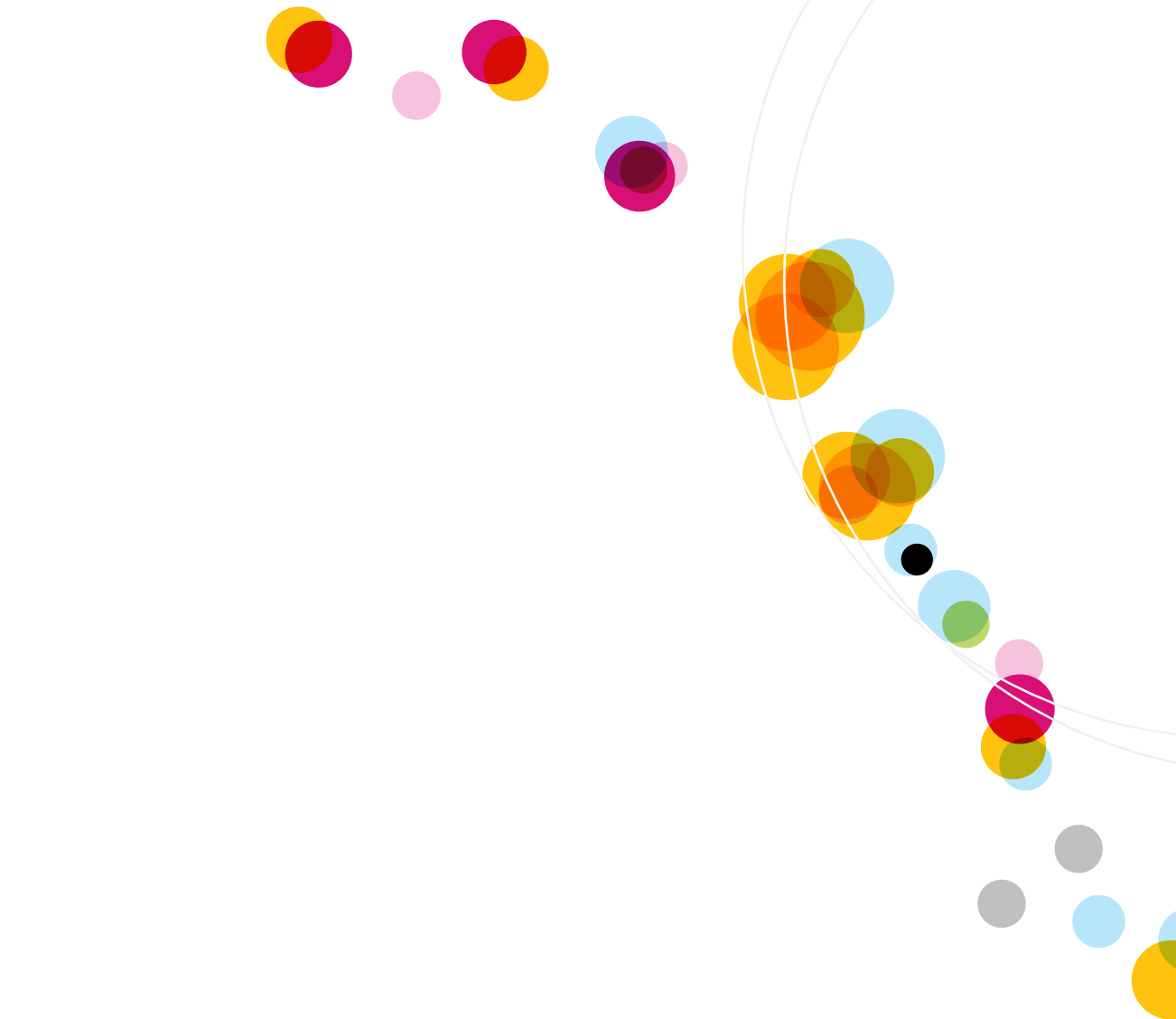




Keeping up with the needs, circumstances and experiences of Australia's diverse and evolving population





2. Community feedback

- < Kingsley Sillah, celebrating at the Wagga Wagga
From All Four Corners: Stories of Migration exhibition.
Photograph courtesy *The Daily Advertiser*, Wagga Wagga

Community feedback

Community feedback is central to government identifying and understanding barriers to clients accessing their programs and services. It helps government agencies keep up with the needs, circumstances and experiences of Australia's diverse and evolving population.

In developing this report, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) sought feedback from the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) and the Australian Human Rights Commission on barriers facing the three culturally diverse client groups that are the particular focus of this report: older Australians, women and Humanitarian Program entrants. More information on consultations and other issues relevant to these organisations are on their websites at www.fecca.org.au, www.refugeecouncil.org.au, www.humanrights.gov.au.

DIAC's community liaison officers and their extensive community networks, based in all states and territories, also contributed their knowledge on access and equity. They used consultative mechanisms, such as Local Settlement Planning Committees and similar forums, and liaison with other networks such as Centrelink Multicultural Advisory Committees.

This feedback detailed a wide range of issues for consideration by agencies, which will inform DIAC's 2009 access and equity discussions with other government departments. Outlined below are the key issues identified through these consultations for the client groups noted above, issues that need to be considered in program design and service delivery by agencies. It is also important to acknowledge actions already taken by government in response to some of the issues detailed.

Older Australians

Australia is a country built on successive waves of immigration from all parts of the world. As our aged population grows, so too will the challenge of providing aged care that is sensitive to Australia's cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.

Many older Australians whose first language is not English lose their facility in English as they age. Some may even revert almost entirely to their mother tongue. These people are particularly vulnerable to isolation.



As our aged population grows, so too will the challenge of providing aged care that is sensitive to Australia's cultural, religious and linguistic diversity

Former refugees can face additional burdens and challenges associated with the aging process resulting from the trauma, loss, grief and hardship associated with their pre-arrival experiences. Furthermore, when cognitive problems develop as part of the aging process, it may be that short-term memory fails and long-term memory dominates, resulting in some clients reliving past traumas.

Information and acceptance

Client awareness of and attitude to the range of services available to support them as they age are key accessibility issues. It is also important that health promotion programs, such as those on diabetes, healthy living and preventing falls are accessible to all older Australians.

Many older Australians do not have the language or computer skills to access online services. Travelling to government offices can be difficult or impossible, and some older people simply do not know how to use public transport. Communicating by phone can be difficult due to language issues and hearing loss. Answering machines and recorded messages can be stressful for older Australians, especially those whose first language is not English. This often results in them abandoning efforts to obtain information.

Verbal information and face-to-face interaction in their homes or in places close by are often the most successful methods for engaging older Australians. Using plain language and avoiding jargon are important. Translated material, audio and audiovisual tools, the use of ethnic community radio and television programs, seminars and presentations in local venues can also be effective. The quality of translated materials can be improved by involving target communities during their design and production.

Community feedback frequently raised the issue of increasing demand for interpreting services as the number of older Australians grows. It is regarded as essential that aged care providers plan and dedicate funding for translating and interpreting services. An emerging workforce development issue is that, while the demand for interpreters for the more established communities is increasing, the number of available interpreters in those languages is decreasing due to retirement.

Using family members or unqualified staff for language support is not always appropriate due to conflicts of interest, concern about conveying sensitive material, compromising confidentiality or lack of technical knowledge. Spouses or other family members relied on in the past for interpreting may no longer be available.

There are cultural expectations in some communities that older people will always be cared for by a family member in the home. Strategies to build community confidence and interest in Australia's aged care facilities are important. Those who do wish to care for older family members at home need adequate support.

Culturally appropriate care

Cultural, religious and linguistic diversity is a defining characteristic of today's Australia. Community feedback consistently stressed the importance of monitoring and enforcing culturally appropriate care standards, and the need for interaction and connection between community organisations and government in the design of appropriate care services. There was also strong support for service providers to be proactive in building community knowledge and advocacy capacity rather than waiting for individual clients to approach them directly with frustrations and concerns.

Community organisations often mentioned the value of service providers' cultural and language skills. Many considered that ethno-specific and multicultural service agencies play a key role in meeting the needs of Australia's diverse older community. This should not, however, decrease the responsibility of mainstream services to provide appropriate funding for workforce development and strategies to attract and retain bilingual workers and for ensuring that staff are culturally competent. It is also important that clients receive culturally appropriate care regardless of where they reside, including in regional Australia.

Women

There can be strong obligations on women from some cultures to provide care in the home for older and disabled family members and children. In such circumstances, these women may not have adequate support themselves or be familiar

with or willing to utilise the government services available to assist them. Increased awareness of support options and alternative care arrangements is important.

Community feedback raised the issue of caring for family members impacting significantly on time available for some women to undertake English language classes or employment activities. This can ultimately decrease migrant women's economic participation in the community. Flexibility in English language programs and employment options can be critical for many women.

Employment and workplace issues

Racial and religious discrimination remain key community concerns. There can be a complex interplay of discrimination based on race, gender and sometimes disability. For example, some Muslim women report feeling harassed and discriminated against in the workplace because they wear the hijab. Women in regional areas reported feeling greater vulnerability since they perceive difficulties in preserving their anonymity if they complain. Knowledge of where to go for information and assistance on issues women face in the workplace is regarded as valuable support.

Migrant women's frequent lack of confidence and experience in job-seeking and negotiating work agreements were other workforce participation issues that were reported. Having overseas qualifications recognised is also a major issue according to some advocates. Additional education and training is often required to gain formal recognition of overseas qualifications and this can compete with settlement priorities such as English language classes, finding accommodation and employment. It was also felt that there is often insufficient acknowledgement by government agencies of the major pressures on refugee women in the initial stages of settlement.

In addition to the challenges generally experienced by many newly arrived migrants, such as limited English, an inability to drive and lack of understanding of the public transport system, women also experience additional stresses associated with supporting other family members. Culturally appropriate and competent childcare can be crucial to women being able to undertake training or enter the workforce.

Support and sensitivity in relation to women who may be from a rural background, illiterate in their own language or have no prior experience in paid work are also important. Many communities stressed the importance of those assisting with employment making the effort to understand fully what a person can bring to the Australian workforce rather than guiding them into the first available low skilled job.

Family support

After migrating to Australia, some women spend several years isolated from the broader community at home in full-time care of their families. Finding paid employment after this can be an overwhelming experience. Programs that support women in transition from full-time homemaker to outside employment can be very helpful if they recognise the value of women's diverse backgrounds and take into account their levels of familiarity with the broader community.

Furthermore, in some communities where the man is traditionally responsible for the sole income, major relationship stresses can emerge when a woman enters into paid employment. Some families may benefit from support to help adjust to the changed role of women after arrival in Australia.

Police and legal system

Community feedback emphasised the need for cultural knowledge and sensitivity in the police and legal systems, particularly in the area of family violence and child protection.

All women, including those newly arrived in Australia and from small and emerging communities, should be able to gain access to the family law system and related resources.

Risks for disclosing violence can be greater in some communities. Some women distrust the police and the justice system due to experiences prior to coming to Australia, fear of possible retribution or lack of confidence in the outcome. Policing and legal systems need to develop effective strategies for engaging and communicating with women and families about these issues.

Financial skills

Information resources in community languages on financial institutions and government income-support agencies are valued resources for women who lack familiarity with Australian systems and do not have strong community networks to support them. Women newly arrived in Australia or from small and emerging communities face significant challenges in this regard. Refugee women in particular can face barriers to attaining financial literacy. They may have lived in refugee camps for many years, have had little and interrupted schooling or lack basic literacy and numeracy in their own language.

Health

Culturally, religiously and linguistically responsive healthcare is reported as a major issue for women. Access to and equity in health promotion programs, such as breast screening and pap tests, are important for all women in both regional and metropolitan areas. Women sometimes avoid seeking crucial medical assistance for themselves and their children because their local medical services do not have a female doctor available or do not provide appropriate language and interpreting support.

Women who have been victims of people-trafficking are extremely vulnerable to marginalisation and require expert support. The availability of support from culturally sensitive professionals who have experience in dealing with sexual assault victims is important for these women if they are to gain the confidence to access broader services and programs and build a new life in Australia.

Access to and equity in health promotion programs, such as breast screening and pap tests, are important for all women



Leadership


The community organisations consulted report that mentoring and leadership programs are particularly helpful in building self-confidence and social connections. They promote greater awareness of services and, importantly, how to influence the design of services to better suit all women.

Humanitarian Program entrants

In addition to facing the normal challenges associated with migration, Humanitarian Program entrants are often further disadvantaged by a range of factors that can include:

- limited and interrupted access to education and employment
- a lack of experience with Australia's social infrastructure and government systems
- a history of poor nutrition and health care
- surviving severe and adverse life events such as war, persecution, torture, trauma and extreme hardship in refugee camps.

Given their often remarkable life stories, hardships and survival, Humanitarian Program entrants generally display remarkable resilience and can contribute enormously to Australia. Community feedback emphasised the value of consistent support, well beyond the initial settlement phase, to enhance Humanitarian Program entrants' prospects as they build new lives.



Humanitarian Program entrants generally display remarkable resilience and can contribute enormously to Australia

Among its goals for resettling refugees, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees lists restoring confidence in political systems, including government services and institutions. In some instances, Humanitarian Program entrants have come from countries where many of the government institutions taken for granted in Australia were either non-existent, corrupt or used as instruments of repression and persecution. Government agencies at all levels have a key role to play in helping Humanitarian Program entrants to restore their confidence.

Community feedback stressed the importance of flexibility in program design and service delivery in relation to this client group. Taking the time to understand and respond to individual needs, particularly in the early years of settlement in Australia, can:

- improve the process of settlement and therefore social inclusion and, in particular, provide pathways to sustainable employment and avoid welfare dependence

- improve the effectiveness of government services and programs
- maximise efficiency and minimise duplication of services
- achieve greater cost effectiveness in government programs.

Information provision and skills development

Feedback reinforces the benefits of a positive attitude from staff in government agencies. Access to interpreters for Humanitarian Program entrants is also important as they can be vulnerable to feeling overwhelmed and discouraged.

Services need to provide information in various ways. Humanitarian Program entrants may not have the language, resources or IT skills to access online services and may prefer verbal or person-to-person interactions. Due to their lack of familiarity and confidence in dealing with new and complex systems and, sometimes, the psychological effects of trauma on memory, information may need to be reinforced and repeated.

The complexities of operating in a new environment, with financial issues ranging from insurance, rent, banking and home loans through to mobile phone plans and daily living expenses, can be overwhelming. In addition, many Humanitarian Program entrants can have extra financial burdens because they have family who have been left behind in destitution and for whom they are a principal source of financial assistance. Therefore, sustained support with financial management and budgeting may be necessary.

Consumer feedback and complaints

For most Humanitarian Program entrants, the opportunity to provide feedback or use complaints mechanisms in relation to government services is something new. Australian feedback and complaints mechanisms therefore need to be

designed in such a way as to establish awareness and understanding as well as build confidence for clients in using these processes.

Policing and the justice system

Policing and justice systems in many of the countries from which Humanitarian Program entrants come are unsophisticated and often corrupt. In many situations, police and military forces were the agents of their persecution. Community feedback indicates that relevant authorities need to be proactive in building confidence about Australia's legal and policing systems. This can help create a greater sense of safety for entrants and encourage active cooperation to address crime in Australia. It can also make a valuable contribution to redressing the consequences of traumas perpetrated by authorities in the countries from which refugees have fled.

Education and employment

Humanitarian Program entrants have a strong desire to secure employment that will help them attain self-reliance, contribute to the Australian workforce and economy, and participate fully in society. It is important that program design and incentives in the employment and vocational training areas are geared towards promoting a high degree of access and participation for Humanitarian Program entrants.

Inadequate knowledge about the Australian workplace environment has been reported as a barrier to Humanitarian Program entrants obtaining and succeeding in employment. They need accessible information about issues such as workplace entitlements, skills recognition, vocational training and employment opportunities. Employment mentoring was frequently identified in feedback as one highly effective tool in supporting newly arrived Humanitarian Program entrants' transition into work.

Children and young people

Communities stressed the vulnerability of children and young people of refugee background. For example, if they are placed in a class according to their age rather than ability they can be set up for failure, but on the other hand they can face humiliation if placed in a class with younger people based on their ability. Strategies to support these young people and address risks of apathy, bullying and isolation are important.

Building confidence in the Australian policing and justice system can make a valuable contribution to redressing the consequences of traumas perpetrated by authorities in the countries from which refugees have fled

Housing

The shortage of affordable rental housing is a problem for many Australians. However, Humanitarian Program entrants are often particularly disadvantaged as they do not have the long-term familiarity with the real estate market or social connections to manage in a highly competitive environment. Reliance on public transport and limited English language skills can also work against success in attaining suitable accommodation.

Health services

Given the often complicated and distressing health history of Humanitarian Program entrants, it is very important that medical services, especially GPs, use interpreting services when required to support these clients. Furthermore, there is a real need for doctors to understand refugee health issues

including complex health needs that have resulted from nutritional deprivation, torture and trauma and poor health provision in the country of origin or while living in a refugee camp. Limited English, lack of familiarity with the public transport system and low income means that Humanitarian Program entrants can face significant barriers in accessing a GP who will understand their needs.

Consultations also raised the issue of the serious dental problems some Humanitarian Program entrants experience and the additional risk and burden of waiting for public dental care. The issue of financial stress on Humanitarian Program entrants resulting from the costs associated with some of the medications they require was also raised.

Profile

Tax talk

Each year, the Australian Tax Office's Access and Diversity Unit holds community forums to get feedback from the community on the value of their products and services. In 2008, the forums attracted almost one hundred representatives in Sydney and Melbourne. Attendees came from new and established communities and from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Settlement service providers and other government agencies also attended.

Demonstrating the importance of these forums, the Commissioner of Taxation, Michael D'Ascenzo, was present at the 2008 Melbourne forum, fielding questions from the audience and meeting with community representatives. In opening the forum, he commented that 'a good, fair tax system that respects people's rights and serves the community is the backbone of a good society'.

Mr D'Ascenzo also highlighted two new initiatives for the coming year – an online audio-visual product and a pilot of a multilingual hotline, reflecting the Tax Office's commitment to act on community feedback.

Participation in the open forum was characterised by openness and honesty, with participants speaking of the challenges faced by new migrants and expressing a willingness to work with the Tax Office to help their communities.

William Daw, representing the Melbourne Sudanese community, echoed the enthusiasm of others in the room to work with the Tax Office to assist his community.

'If you don't know the tax system, you become a victim of it. Volunteers from our community can work with you to educate the Sudanese community.'

Other participants spoke about the difficulties of getting tax information from the internet or over the phone, and said that people with limited English skills are often 'scared to ask for advice'. A representative from the Chinese community reinforced this, requesting more face-to-face services for people from a non-English speaking background.

The relaxed atmosphere gave many participants the confidence to express their views, and facilitator Thang Ngo, National Manager SBS In Language, ensured everyone had the opportunity to speak. In closing, Thang urged the participants to continue working together to achieve more.



William Daw, Chairperson of the Dinka (Jieng) Community Council of Australia Inc.

Photograph courtesy Australian Taxation Office