



Diversity Strengthened Through Volunteering

Assisting Collaborative Community Employment Support Services, Woodridge, Queensland

This project also relates to:

- Community Harmony
- Education

Refugee volunteers, mainly from Burundi, Rwanda and Burma, were trained to assist newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants settle in their communities in and around Woodridge, a southern suburb of Brisbane. In providing this assistance, the refugee volunteers gained much needed work experience, improved their capacity to find work and boosted their confidence and self-esteem.

The volunteers built greater awareness among the broader community about their backgrounds and cultures and of their contribution to Australian society by speaking at local schools and other forums on behalf of their communities.

The project's aims were to:

- meet the practical needs of newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants by developing a system of support from people who spoke their own language, understood their culture and had recently experienced the transition to life in Australia
- develop the capacity of refugee communities to respond more effectively to the needs of their own community members
- encourage refugee volunteers to take part in training and to understand the benefits of volunteering
- empower refugees by giving them the opportunity to develop new skills and gain greater confidence
- provide experience that could assist refugees in their transition to employment or further study
- build greater awareness among the broader community of the background and culture of new arrivals and of their contribution to Australian society.

Identifying a need through grassroots observation

Currently there is a heavy demand for volunteer organisations to help refugees integrate in their new communities.

Assisting Collaborative Community Employment Support Services (ACCES Services) staff in Woodridge identified a need for a volunteer training program that sourced volunteers from newly arrived refugee communities to increase volunteer capacity in local non-government organisations and help new arrivals successfully settle into the community.

Promoting the project

The project was designed as a *Pathway to Employment* initiative. The refugee community was invited to a morning tea and information session using flyers designed and distributed by ACCES Services, and placed at Logan City Council and the Ethnic Communities Council of Logan City and the Gold Coast Multicultural Communities Council.

ACCES Services project managers provided the names of possible and appropriately qualified participants. The cultural groups approached were from Sudan, Afghanistan, Burma, Ethiopia, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Somalia.

The project was also promoted by word-of-mouth. Bilingual workers were used on a volunteer basis to interpret. Unfortunately, not all groups approached were able to be involved in the project due to prior commitments.

Following the community consultation, ACCES Services successfully applied for a grant under the Queensland Government's *Community Renewal Program* to train refugees as volunteers to empower refugee communities to support each other.

The project

Recently arrived refugees who had settled well were trained as volunteers to work with new arrivals from their own communities. One of the principal aims of the project was to develop a system of support from people who spoke the refugees' own language, and understood their culture. ACCES Services Volunteers Coordinator, Kathleen Bierge, explained:

When people first arrive at the airport or their new homes, it's so nice to have their people supporting them and their own food prepared for them, to make them feel more comfortable.

The volunteers were not only equipped with the language skills needed to communicate with the community, they also understood the community's cultural norms and expectations. As a result, they were better able than ordinary volunteers to identify cultural differences. They were able to relate precisely what the new arrivals needed to know about Australian culture.

The volunteers also had a solid understanding of the newly arrived refugees' practical needs because they themselves had recently experienced the transition to life in Australia.

Many newly arrived refugees have come from an environment where work life was severely disrupted. Their levels of English might be poor and their qualifications may not be recognised upon arrival. Another principle benefit of the project was to provide much needed work experience and skills for newly arrived refugees, improving their capacity to find work and boosting their overall self-esteem and confidence.

The training

Most of the refugees involved in the project had no prior training or employment experience. The training provided was crucial to the project's success.

Training Australia was engaged to train the volunteers by fostering an inclusive learning culture using group-based learning techniques. Computers were needed for the training. Participants were provided with mentors for support.

From July to August 2006, 18 training sessions were conducted focusing on:

- working with clients
- working with communities

- working with groups (three units of Certificate 4 in Workplace Assessment and Training)
- understanding community services, including how to apply for funding
- communication and presentation skills
- computer skills, including email and PowerPoint training
- information sessions on relevant government and volunteer organisations run by guest speakers from agencies such as Centrelink, Legal Aid, schools and volunteer organisations, such as Volunteering Logan River Valley.

The 10 participants finally chosen were from the Burundian, Rwandan, Tanzanian, Liberian and Burmese communities. They were trained and gained the necessary skills to develop leadership and raise awareness within their respective cultural groups.

After receiving the training, the refugee volunteers practised their new skills by making presentations to ACCES Services staff. They were then ready to raise broader community awareness by speaking at local schools and other forums about their cultures on behalf of their communities.

Members of the Burundian community also facilitated multicultural training to over 180 students in primary and secondary schools.

The participants were encouraged to seek paid or voluntary work at the end of the project using their volunteer work as work experience, and listing the training they had undertaken on their résumés.

Achievements

The information sessions on culture that the volunteers presented at local schools promoted wider cultural awareness of the needs and the issues facing newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants. As a result, enrolment rates of refugee children at local mainstream schools have improved thus enhancing their integration and socialisation. Better relations have also been built between communities and organisations that deliver settlement services.

The training program encouraged new and emerging communities to volunteer because they realised that it was a pathway to employment and they could update their skills.



Jeremie helps people find their way in Australia, and adapt to their new life. He highly recommends the volunteer project as a good way for people to settle in Australia. He gained significant skills through participating in the project.

Profile > Jeremie

Jeremie left Burundi in 1993 because of the war and migrated to Malawi where he lived for almost nine years in a refugee camp before being accepted for settlement in Australia.

Jeremie came to Australia with his wife and four children. A fifth child was born in Australia. He has three boys and two girls who are all aged under thirteen.

Initially, Jeremie had difficulty adapting in Australia due to language barriers. The support he received from Australian volunteers when he arrived really helped him. He said:

Australian people are lovely people. One day I went to a shopping centre down here and got lost. On arrival volunteers had provided us with ID cards with our address and telephone number on the back. If you are lost, you can show it to someone. The man helped me get home.

Jeremie was very interested in participating in the volunteer program to help facilitate the refugees' transition. He believes his work is important because he speaks the same language as the refugees he assists, and can help them develop skills to better integrate in Australia:

If you are welcomed by someone who can speak your own language, you feel more welcome. We are already skilled. You can set up a volunteer group and start to help people.

Jeremie helps people find their way in Australia, do their shopping and adapt to their new life. He highly recommends the volunteer project as a good way for people to settle in Australia. He gained significant skills through participating in the volunteer program:

I did a presentation about African life with about 200 students at a school. It gave me confidence to learn the language and to talk.

photo < Pascal and Jeremie, volunteers for the Burundian community

The volunteers gained significant work skills and some pursued further studies. Other benefits included increased confidence, especially in communication, and the opportunity to talk about their culture in the broader community. As volunteers coordinator, Kathleen Bierge, said:

The training gave the participants an insight into what studying entails. It gave them confidence that they could do things, such as stand in front of a crowd and talk about their community.

A participant from Liberia found employment less than a year after arriving in Australia. One of the volunteers is now working as a bilingual worker, and another has found employment in a community organisation that assists refugees obtain housing. Others are involved with their communities in helping new arrivals and in promoting the benefit of volunteering to their communities.

Socially, the participants were encouraged to meet others and form independent networks. Participants felt a sense of belonging and this truly helped them integrate into their new communities.

The project also helped new arrivals and the local communities. The participants had access to volunteers from their own community, from their own language or culture, making integration much easier.

The help the volunteers provide can often be very simple, but hugely beneficial, such as familiarising a new arrival with the route to walk to the office. Pascal, a volunteer from the Burundian community, commented on how the program offered many practical advantages, for individuals and for communities:

Last week we received 45 people from Burundi, a huge number. With our volunteer group, we worked together just for the success of the families. The training has not only benefited us but the whole community.

At the invitation of both Volunteering Logan River Valley and Volunteering Queensland, the ACCES Services Volunteer Coordinator has presented an overview of engaging volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds highlighting the issues and successes of *Diversity Strengthened Through Volunteering* project model.

Challenges

The training could not continue because of lack of funding.

Volunteerism can be an unfamiliar concept for newly arrived refugees who are unaware of the diverse and vital roles of volunteers in Australian society.

Meeting the needs of all volunteers was difficult due to the competing schedules and responsibilities of the participants and the fact that the funding only lasted for two months.

The project would have worked better if free childcare had been available. Many volunteers were not able to participate in all the training sessions because of childcare responsibilities. Other clients would have liked to participate but were constrained by the need to attend TAFE or to meet Centrelink requirements.

Key factors that contributed to the project's success

The new arrivals appreciated being able to receive help from someone who understood where they came from and who could communicate with them in their own language.

The encouragement given by ACCES Services staff, along with the enthusiasm of the refugees and the support they gave each other ensured that the project was a success.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

When running a similar project, organisers should:

- consult the community to identify needs
- identify committed clients and potential participants who are available
- ensure the volunteer training program is well structured
- strategically plan the project and construct a model that is replicable in the long term.

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