



Sudanese Community Cross Cultural Training for Police

Victoria Police, Dandenong, Victoria

This project also relates to:

- Community Harmony
- Education

A cross-cultural training package was designed by Victorian police in consultation with the Sudanese community, to be used to educate the police themselves. It provides information on current issues facing the Sudanese community in Victoria, and in Dandenong in particular, and breaks down cultural stereotypes in order to build a better relationship between the police and the Sudanese community.

Over the past four or five years, Melbourne's Greater Dandenong and South East region has received much greater numbers of humanitarian entrants and, in particular, many more from Sudan.

Considerable adverse media attention has been given to Sudanese youth committing traffic offences, and even for socialising in public. The media has labelled groups of Sudanese youths socialising and laughing together in the streets as gangs. This media attention gave rise to a false belief that crime rates had rocketed since the Sudanese had arrived in the region. Sudanese youth are actually under-represented in crime statistics.

Police officers began experiencing some minor difficulties in dealing with the Sudanese community. Sudanese youth were congregating simply to socialise and this was being misconstrued both by the public and the police because they thought it was detrimental to public safety.

The Sudanese community generally had not had good experiences with the police in Sudan, and associated uniformed police with memories of torture and trauma. Because of these deeply-held fears, the community was reluctant to communicate with the Victoria Police at all. Trust needed to be built between the two groups.

Identifying a need

Victoria Police identified a need for cross-cultural training for their members because

of the breakdown in communication and the discrepancies between police and community perceptions and actual crime statistics.

Existing cross-cultural training packages were examined but were found too general, not especially relevant to police officers, and overly time consuming and expensive to implement. A need was identified for a training package designed for use by the police and focused specifically on improving service delivery to the Sudanese community in Dandenong, an emerging community with special needs.

Engaging community leaders

Dandenong Police Station's Multicultural Liaison Unit had already begun to network with Sudanese community leaders prior to identifying a need for the project, initially through the Sudanese Community Association of Australia. Frank and open consultations were held with prominent community members that assisted the police in gaining a realistic picture of what occurs in the Sudanese community.

This openness was possible because of the hard work that had gone into building community leaders' trust. After approaches from several community leaders who wanted to become involved in the project and initial dialogue, a core group of leaders was chosen and supportive relationships were developed. These leaders then encouraged the community to attend the subsequent community consultations.

Engaging youth

The Multicultural Liaison Unit had already begun to build strong relationships with Sudanese youth who they had approached to become involved in sporting activities the unit ran, such as soccer, basketball and pool. They used the contacts they had made to personally invite youth to the community consultations.

Community consultation

A series of consultations conducted between the Sudanese community and police during the initial design phase of the training package helped enormously in raising awareness of the difficulties and issues that the Sudanese community face.

Interpreters were used when needed but usually those attending had reasonable English skills. The consultations were advertised by word-of-mouth.

Senior Constable Joseph Herrech of Dandenong Police Station's Multicultural Liaison Unit said:

By teaching police certain facts about the community, they better their interactions. There was a lot of consultation. We used their expertise. They educated us on what some of the current issues are with the community. We also told them our issues. As a result of this mutual feedback, we were able to come to a happy medium.

The training package

The Multicultural Liaison Unit devised a training package to include information on:

- Africa generally, and Sudan in particular
- the pre-migration experience of refugees
- predominant religions and some history
- cultural groups and tribes and their languages and physical appearance
- other cultural aspects, such as gender issues
- the police in Sudan
- the definition of a refugee
- statistics relating to African migration to Dandenong
- issues facing young Sudanese men
- working with domestic violence cases
- how refugees' experiences can affect their perceptions of police and their behaviour in Australia more generally.

The Multicultural Liaison Unit has delivered around 100 presentations using the package in Melbourne's South East region.

The two-hour package was first delivered once a month to senior constables in order that they might act as mentors for lower ranks and disseminate information in the package. All sergeants were then included. Specialist police groups, such as youth resource officers and crime desk officers, were targeted next.

The plan is to eventually deliver the two-hour package once a month to all members of the Victoria Police with the assistance of multicultural liaison officers from across the state.

Presentations have already been delivered in Melbourne suburbs, such as Moorabbin, and in rural areas, such as Wonthaggi and Swan Hill.

Adapting the training for other service providers

The package has been adapted for the Multicultural Liaison Unit to use in work it regularly undertakes with agencies providing services to the Sudanese community. The unit uses it to explain the issues facing the community to agencies such as Centrelink, the Department of Human Services, the Magistrate's Court, secondary school English as a Second Language teachers and local councils.

Achievements

The cross-cultural training package has helped enormously in dispelling the false belief that the Sudanese community is over represented in crime statistics.

The community consultations, along with advice about how to approach the Sudanese community given during the training, have helped police gain the community's confidence and assistance. Senior Constable Garry Gough said:

It's definitely helped in regard to just attending at their homes. When the Sudanese or African community has had some crime committed against them and the police need to discuss matters with them, a home visit is made. Initially, it was hard to get any information out of them even though they were the victims, but this is changing as a result of the training.

The cross-cultural training package has assisted police understand cultural adaptation hurdles facing both Sudanese women and men.

According to Senior Constable James Waterson:

The Sudanese women now understand that within Aussie culture they are on an equal footing with the men. That has caused some really major issues with some of the Sudanese men.

As a result of understanding the Sudanese community's cultural backgrounds, police officers are now better equipped to deal with domestic violence when it arises in the community.

Challenges

Although most of the feedback was positive, some police were not initially very enthusiastic about the training because they were unable to appreciate its long-term benefits. The training package is continually improved and refined in response to feedback. Support for the training has grown along with an improvement in community relations.

Key factors in the project's success

A large part of the project's success can be attributed to the fact the package has been written for and by police officers. This has ensured the package is relevant and that the material can be absorbed more successfully. The package is also very professionally designed so that it maintains the audience's attention.

The package is very applicable for the training of police throughout Australia. The package is flexible enough to allow local content to be removed and replaced so the training can be used elsewhere.

Improving the package

In May 2007, a member of the Sudanese Nasser community organised a three-week humanitarian tour of Southern Sudan for members of the police and civilians. The tour has helped enormously in increasing understanding of the perspective of Sudanese clients.

While in Southern Sudan the group lived as the Sudanese live, studied some of the police services and witnessed how some of the United Nations-deployed services are dealing with the Sudanese population and issues. Acting Inspector Ian Gillespie and Senior Constable Joey Herrech represented the Dandenong police.

In Sudan, Senior Constable Joey Herrech noticed large numbers of young males grouped together and at first felt intimidated. They were playing cards, laughing and carrying on. He then realised how normal their behaviour was and that it really did not differ from an Australian-born group of kids.

Senior Constable Herrech resolved to emphasise, during the cross cultural training course, the role police have in widening the understanding of the general community by explaining that it is normal for young people to congregate, and not to be concerned about it unless there is some evidence that they are doing something wrong.

Unexpected outcomes

Refugee and humanitarian entrants are given general information about Australia before they arrive in the country. They are invited to attend the Australian Government's pre-embarkation *Australian Cultural Orientation Program*, which the International Organization for Migration runs for the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Victoria Police's Multicultural Liaison Unit had successfully been nominated for a newly formed *Australian Cultural Orientation Program* consultative committee, which was established in November 2006.

When the Department of Immigration and Citizenship heard that the Sudanese community had invited the unit to send some officers to Sudan in May 2007, it seized the opportunity to send the officers on to Cairo to be guest presenters at an *Australian Cultural Orientation Program* course.

The friendly, helpful presentation they gave was the same training the Multicultural Liaison Unit regularly gives to newly arrived refugees and migrants in Australia to help allay fears of contact with police. They explained, through simple role-plays, the rights and responsibilities of Australian residents and citizens when approached by the police and some basic information about driving and licensing laws in Australia. A police uniform was hung up in the classroom so that the refugees could get accustomed to it.

In October 2007, when the International Organization for Migration was holding its annual training for *Australian Cultural Orientation Program* presenters in Bangkok, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship suggested Senior Constable Joey Herrech come along to present the Victoria Police's training for newly arrived ethnic groups, and then go on to visit the Mae La refugee camp on the Thai–Burma border.

The trip helped Victoria Police understand more about the Burmese refugees' culture and observe first-hand that they would really need encouragement to report crime in Australia or to request assistance from police. Victoria Police is now planning to establish a Burmese consultative committee to gain the community's trust and help build relationships with newly arrived Burmese refugees.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

The best advice for other police forces wishing to design similar cross-cultural training packages is to ensure sufficient research has been conducted. In order to adequately conduct this research, it is crucial to build a trusting relationship with the target community.

Engage young people in the consultations, as they will become the community leaders. A youth roundtable should be established.

When designing the training, a useful starting point is to draw on culturally specific training packages already in existence for discussion with the community. A training package designed for police on the Sudanese community in Melbourne will raise many issues of relevance to police working with the same community in Sydney.

After drawing on this information, it is then very important to discover and evaluate local issues that are specific to each district by consulting the community and its leaders.

It is essential for presenters to know their subject matter well and be able to talk about the demographics of the region because members of the police force are very questioning of the content and credentials of any course.

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photo > Senior Constable Andrew Garrett with John, Gai, Amir and Senior Constable Joey Herrech