








Refugee and New Migrant Youth Program

Centrecare – Catholic Migrant Centre, Perth, Western Australia

This project also relates to:

-  Law
-  Community Harmony
-  Employment
-  Education
-  Health

The *Refugee and New Migrant Youth Program* provides young refugees who have arrived in Australia on humanitarian visas in the last six months to five years, with information on a range of settlement issues such as employment, recreation and housing. The objective of the program is to encourage and increase the social participation of refugee young people.

Youth workers provide support and information to the refugees through one-on-one case management, and informal counselling. They are available to advocate on behalf of clients to help them access other government and community services.

Youth workers run information sessions at a number of local schools that are partners in the project. They are Balga State High School, Melville State high School, North Lake Senior Campus, Aranmore Catholic College, Greenwood Senior High School, Perth Modern School and the Australian Islamic College. Occasionally guest speakers also present information at the schools.

Four school holiday camps are held every year to encourage social participation.

The program has received annual funding from the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship under the *Settlement Grants Program* since July 2004.

Identifying a need

Through direct contact with refugees, it became evident to Centrecare that children were taking on responsibilities normally performed by adults because their English was much better than their parents'. The children were attending their parents' appointments with various agencies and missing out on playtime.

Young girls, in particular were expected to remain at home during the holidays to help look after younger siblings and help maintain the house. This leads to further social isolation for the girls.

Centrecare identified a need to provide a service for newly arrived refugee youth who often experience social isolation when they first arrive in Australia. This isolation can be compounded by them living far from where youth events are held, in areas with poor public transport.

Refugee youth also lack financial resources and, as a result, are even more prone to social isolation. They need assistance to access recreational opportunities outside of school.

Anecdotal evidence also suggested there were some issues in Perth between African refugee youth and Aboriginal youth, largely due to lack of awareness from both communities.

The program

Participants in the program are from a wide range of countries including Burma, Afghanistan, Iran, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Eritrea, Burundi and Iraq. They have been in Australia for between two months and five years.

The program consists of:

- **One-on-one casework:** Youth workers informally counsel the refugee youth and provide casework to help clients access government and community services.
- **Community information sessions:** Youth workers deliver talks at several schools with Intensive English Centres to impart practical information on issues such as hygiene and nutrition, housing, alcohol awareness, stress management, self-esteem and depression. The information is provided over a five-week period in 50-minute sessions. Youth workers who are able to relate well with the students deliver the sessions.

Centrelink provided a guest speaker at one of the schools to explain its services and Employment Directions, a career guidance service, also presented information.

- **School holiday activities:** Activities such as film and bowling nights and barbecues have been run for up to 22 young people.

School holiday recreational camps are held for between 10 and 20 high school students (12 to 17 year olds) four times a year. The camps are held over four days and include sports such as karate and volleyball, water activities such as life saving and rescuing, capoeira (a Brazilian martial arts dance), campfire singing, and educational talks.

Drama workshops are also conducted to encourage expression of stories from a young person's country of origin and culture.

Police multicultural liaison officers give guest talks at the camps to help break down misunderstanding and improve relations. Employment Directions also provided information to youth at the camps.

One of the camps was held in January 2007. Twenty-eight young people from a number of backgrounds including the Liberian, Congolese, Burmese, Burundian, Sudanese, Iranian, and Afghani communities attended the camp. They had been in Australia for different periods ranging from two months to two years. Seven facilitators were involved and five stayed to supervise overnight.

An Indigenous Australian conducted a short workshop on Aboriginal culture and history. He taught the young people traditional dances and gave a performance on the didgeridoo.

Achievements

The Centrecare activities have been an empowering tool to help young refugees feel less segregated from the Australian community. A youth worker at Centrecare, Melissa Rudez, recalled:

One of my fondest memories of the camp was one girl who on the first day of camp told us that she didn't speak English because she was too scared to talk to anyone. By the end of the camp she was exchanging phone numbers with people who she wanted to be friends with.

There has been a marked increase in the levels of confidence of the young people who, with improved English, are communicating more with people from other cultural backgrounds.

Many of the young people involved in the project had never seen a beach before and were delighted by it. They learnt to overcome their fear of water through involvement in water activities at the camps.

Challenges

A significant challenge was to overcome some teachers' reluctance to discuss refugee youth issues with other students.

The scope of the project was to help 12 to 20 year olds. This age limit proved a barrier, as there were clearly eight to 11 year olds who also needed assistance.

Lack of space at Centrecare's premises in central Perth prohibits the establishment of a youth drop-in centre there. Such a centre would really assist social interaction between the youth.

Key factors in the project's success

The commitment and support of Centrecare's staff was a key factor in the success of the program.

The program was able to fully function because it received strong support from all schools, teachers, the community, and Police Multicultural Liaison Officers.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

It is important to ensure there is a definite need in the community for such a program and that there is no overlap or duplication of services.

Ideally, a youth drop-in centre should be developed, to provide an environment where young people feel more comfortable and are more willing to open up.

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