



Southern Sudanese Women's Project

Sydney West Area Health Service, Penrith, New South Wales

This project also relates to:

-  Families
-  Education
-  Health

The *Southern Sudanese Women's Project* aims to improve the quality of life of women refugees in Penrith, on the outer western fringe of Sydney. The women have been given assistance to adjust to a new lifestyle and culture, and to meet their information needs about health and nutrition, language skills, education, employment prospects and Centrelink payments and services.

Many Southern Sudanese people settling in the Penrith area are from the Dinka tribe. Families generally have between three and six children. A significant number of the women are single mothers.

Southern Sudanese women in the Penrith area faced social isolation and lacked knowledge about the types of services available to them. They also had difficulty gaining access to services, such as English classes, because they lacked childcare and transport to the venue.

As new arrivals from refugee backgrounds, the women presented a huge range of needs including:

- basic health and settlement information
- assistance for torture and trauma issues
- English language tuition
- child care sometimes for large numbers of young children
- information about available services
- information about Australian food and nutrition
- help with intergenerational issues.

The project was designed for women only because it was considered important to provide the women with a confidential and safe place to explore the wide range of emotions, experiences and gender-specific needs that had resulted from their refugee experience.

The women needed to be empowered because of these experiences as well as their lack of experience in political and economic decision making.

The project began in February 2005 as a partnership between local community organisations and federal, state and local government agencies. Sydney West Area Health Service, Centrelink, Mamre Plains Ltd (Mamre), Mission Australia, Nepean Community College, Nepean Migrant Access, Penrith City Council, Penrith Women's Health Service, and TAFE Outreach were all equal partners in the project.

Identifying a need

Statistics from the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship indicated a growing population of humanitarian entrants settling in the Penrith area. Most of the new arrivals were Sudanese, an emerging community with an array of settlement needs.

Consulting the community

The Penrith Emerging Refugee Community consultation was held in May 2004 and involved the participation of a number of local community services. Sudanese community leaders were engaged to help develop and promote the project and to bring community members along to the consultation. An interpreter was engaged to facilitate communication.

The consultation revealed that the Sudanese community needed extra help to settle into their new environment and establish new lives in Australia. They needed to receive more information about general health, mental health, employment and training, interpreters and accommodation.

The women highlighted their need for functional English classes with childcare, an opportunity to socialise with other Southern Sudanese women under the same roof, and the need to learn more about services available to them in the local area. They needed readily available childcare support and transportation in order to be able to access these services effectively.

The outcomes of the consultation further indicated an urgent need for a comprehensive plan involving community and health services providing short- and long-term programs, including educational and recreational activities. These programs would promote a sense of security and increase self-esteem and healthy living.

Engaging community leaders

Consultation with Southern Sudanese community members, Akon and her husband Deng, who had arrived in Australia some nine years previously and were relatively well settled, was central to developing the project. They acted as community leaders and became heavily involved in the project.

Akon had noticed that many of the Southern Sudanese women were struggling to adjust to their new environment. They had large families and difficulties accessing education and work because of a lack of available childcare, knowledge of services and Australian support systems. She said:

When I came we were only the second Southern Sudanese family to arrive in Australia. Things are a little better now but it's still hard for families especially with the kids' education.

Promoting the project

Akon and Deng were pivotal to the effective promotion of the project. They contacted local women to let them know of the project and encouraged them to attend the proposed classes. They were provided with a monthly reimbursement to cover telephone costs.

A community meeting was also held to promote the project and community workers spoke to Southern Sudanese women already known to them about the project.

The project

The project aimed to:

- increase support and education opportunities for Southern Sudanese women in the Penrith local government area
- increase participants' English language skills
- improve the women's knowledge and skills in health and nutrition for them and their families
- support the settlement of Southern Sudanese families

- improve the self-esteem and confidence of the participants
- enhance social connections between the Sudanese women
- increase workers' knowledge of community needs to ensure that programs meet those needs
- increase the value accorded to traditional Southern Sudanese culture within an Australian context
- increase awareness of the dangers of alcohol and other drugs
- further develop the women's parenting skills
- develop participants' knowledge and awareness of child protection and domestic violence issues and services.

A multi-service partnership was formed that proved critical to the success of the project. It enabled the project to attract funding and pool skills and expertise. The Sudanese community was engaged through vital connections already made by other project partners and the Southern Sudanese women were introduced to a wide range of workers from different agencies.

The organisations that had been involved in the Penrith Emerging Refugee Community consultation formed a project steering committee. Penrith City Council, Mission Australia and TAFE New South Wales later joined the committee, which came to represent a coalition of services that were working with the Southern Sudanese community.

Program classes were held at Mamre every Wednesday from 10.00 am until 2.00 pm during school term time from February 2005 until December 2006. The program initially consisted of an English class centred on nutrition. It included cooking as a component in the morning and a health and settlement information session in the afternoon.

Childcare and transport were provided and interpreters or Sudanese bicultural workers were used to overcome language barriers for the women throughout the program.

All project partners contributed to the costs through worker hours, the use of venue and transport, or through management and administrative support. The partnership approach served to capitalise on the expertise and available resources of a number of services.

Activities

The women's program runs to a school term timetable for two hours in the morning with a half hour lunch break followed by a 90-minute afternoon session.

Eighteen women attended the classes in the first year of the program. The program was co-facilitated by Sydney West Area Health Service and Penrith Women's Health Care.

For the first nine months of the project, English and nutrition were the major components of the morning sessions. There were regular practical cooking classes, where participants learnt to cook easy, nutritious, 'Australian' dishes. Traditional Sudanese food was hard to find, expensive and took a lot of time to prepare. The women wanted to learn recipes they could cook using easily available low-cost ingredients.

During the cooking sessions the issue of being able to grow a variety of garden vegetables was discussed. Many of the women had grown food in Sudan and were keen to develop a garden to see what could be grown in Australia. Mamre identified an area of paddock that could be used and Penrith City council provided funding towards its creation. A community day was arranged. Men and women from the community fenced an area that was to become the garden.

After the first nine months the morning session changed to a more formal English class that incorporated settlement issues. An English as a Second Language teacher from Nepean Community College taught the morning sessions with assistance from volunteers and health facilitators.

In the afternoons, there was either an information session on services available or a facilitated discussion about a health topic. Particular health themes were developed for each term. The themes included women's wellbeing, exercise and parenting.

A number of outings were organised for the group to familiarise the women with some local services and amenities that had been identified during sessions as being important to their wellbeing. Such services included the Women's Health Centre, the Community Health Centre and the local swimming pool. Volunteers were needed to provide extra support to the group during these excursions.

A number of service organisations also visited the group to provide information including:

- the Red Cross Tracing Service
- women's health nurses from Penrith Women's Health Centre
- child and family nurses from Community Health
- nutrition workers from the New South Wales Refugee Health Service.

Dance and music were often used throughout the programs to lift spirits and to energise the group. The women reported that singing and dancing were ways to feel better and more relaxed. It helped them to deal with their stress and sadness, and maintain their cultural traditions. It was an alternative form of stress relief and relaxation, different to western styles of relaxation and exercise.

In 2006 a consultation was held with men from the Southern Sudanese community to identify their needs. As a result of this discussion and consultations with the women attending the group program, the project partners decided to extend the project to include additional activities for women, and to add courses and activities for men in the community.

From 2007, training has been provided five days a week. The classes include English; vocational training courses, such as childcare and child development, cleaning and housekeeping; and computer courses for men and women. Local organisations also provide additional services to the community, including a supported playgroup run by Mission Australia, and a cultural program and sewing classes run by Nepean Migrant Access.

Achievements

The women's program is continuing and, as of October 2007, 35 women were registered, with 45 children attending childcare. Twenty men and women attend computer and vocational courses in the evening at Mamre.

According to a community leader, parents were having difficulty reading school letters and helping their children with homework, but the activities at Mamre not only helped them learn English but also really benefited the women's morale and self-esteem. She said:

Even if they don't learn much, they can meet with other families. When I see them coming home on the bus, they're all laughing.

The women reported that their knowledge about how to manage in Australian society had been strengthened, for example many can now successfully find a telephone number in a telephone book, and are able to ring to make an appointment. They understand more about what foods are available and what they should be eating to maintain a healthy diet. Participants acknowledged the benefits of understanding the health service and using interpreter services.

Women reported that they now communicate more effectively with their children using strategies they learnt, such as identifying problems and finding solutions, and sharing cultural practices and beliefs in a way that maintains family harmony. They also reported a better understanding of child protection laws in Australia.

The whole community supported the project, with male family members encouraging the women to attend.

The women got to know each other through regular attendance at the group and through doing activities together. They widened their social circles and began connecting with each other outside the group. Previously most of the women had tended to socialise locally with people from the same clan, however getting to know people from other clans and other local areas helped facilitate connections across both clan and geographical boundaries. Sydney West Area Health Service project officer, Clare Darling, said:

Until women become part of a community they feel very isolated. Their health is affected and they may get depressed. The women have really enjoyed the activities, which have helped to break their isolation and in so doing built their community spirit.

Additional benefits

The program supported women with potential to develop leadership skills. They have since become involved in the steering committees of this and other local projects.

One woman from the program was trained as a bicultural worker and has gained employment as a result. Others have been involved in singing and craft projects.

Participants have felt valued throughout the project because they have been involved in planning and evaluating the program and their needs have been addressed. The Manager of Nepean Migrant Access, Laura Sardo, said:

Community leadership has really emerged from this project. We can certainly say the community has leaders and the leaders are working for the community and developing their skills. They can build links between the cultural/traditional way of living and the mainstream. People are coming out of their shells and are able to talk about their stories.

Local employers have also recognised the project and have approached Mamre to offer jobs to the Southern Sudanese community.

The coalition of project partners became a focal point through which other organisations could gain access to the Sudanese community and offer them services.

The project partners expressed enormous appreciation for how much they had learnt from the women. They felt extremely privileged to have been involved in a project that took the Sudanese women participants on a journey that was at times emotional, but continues to reap very positive outcomes.

Challenges

One of the initial challenges for the project workers was to find a venue that could accommodate the women's needs. The project needed a classroom, childcare facilities, a fully equipped kitchen and a space to create a garden, all near to where the women lived. Fortunately, the project partners found that Mamre Plains Ltd, which is a Sisters of Mercy establishment, was keen to support the refugee community and the project and was able to transport the women and children in the Mamre bus.

Language was a major challenge in working with the women. The majority of the women had little or no English and many had received little formal education, and were illiterate in their own language. Dinka was the most common shared language and some women spoke other Sudanese languages, such as Madi or Bari. Many could also speak Sudanese Arabic (also known as Juba).

Interpreters or Sudanese bicultural workers were needed throughout the program. At times it was difficult to book female Dinka interpreters for the group, as there is a shortage. The project therefore had to use a Sudanese Arabic interpreter on several occasions.

The biggest obstacle affecting the sustainability of the project is a lack of consistent funding. Although running the project incurred significant costs (for childcare, transport and worker hours) it did not receive consistent, dedicated funding from one source over the first two years.

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs is the only source of regular funding for some childcare costs.

A significant challenge for the workers involved was the amount of time it took to plan, develop, consult, secure funding, organise childcare and transport, implement, document and evaluate the project.

The women had very complex needs and as a result of developing trusting relationships with the project partners, they often asked for assistance in regards to matters beyond the scope of this project such as finding suitable accommodation. They had difficulty understanding why they needed to be referred on to other services.

The women were unfamiliar with a welfare system of any kind, and sometimes found it difficult to understand the professional boundaries governing the roles of the workers and volunteers. At times 'grey' areas arose and it was also hard for workers and volunteers to know where to place their professional boundaries.

Referring the women to local services was not easy because of language and cultural barriers, and the local service providers' lack of awareness of the complexity of the community's needs. Transport and language barriers also impeded access.

It was necessary to explain to the women what to expect from each service. As a result of these difficulties, the project partners held training sessions for local services to develop their awareness and improve their capacity to provide appropriate services.

Key factors in the project's success

The multi-sector partnership approach is a major factor in the continuing success of the project. This approach enables sharing of expertise and resources and ensures a collaborative approach that minimises duplication of services. The Manager of Nepean Migrant Access, Laura Sardo, said:

The complexities and needs of the community were such that we needed to develop that formal sort of coalition where we kept minutes and documented everything because otherwise a lot of work would be lost.

Initial and ongoing consultation and evaluation of the project with community members and leaders has ensured that services offered are in line with community needs.

The language classes were structured to develop general English skills and to increase students' knowledge about nutrition, cooking, budgeting, appointment making and using a diary. This 'functional', two-pronged approach ensured the English learnt was relevant to language and information needs.

Due to insufficient funding and limited worker hours, volunteers were essential to ensure the program was adequately staffed and supported.

Interpreters or Sudanese bicultural workers were needed to overcome language barriers for the women throughout the program.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

It is very important to:

- involve community leaders in community consultation, and in planning, implementing and evaluating the program
- ensure some services or resources are offered to the community as a result of the community consultations, so that community trust and participation are built up and maintained
- regularly evaluate the programs provided to ensure they are relevant to community needs
- be flexible in order to be able to address emerging needs
- ensure open communication, clarity of roles and responsibilities and timeframes with the project partners

Profile > Akuc

Akuc arrived in Sydney in November 2002. Akuc is a mother of six and had never left Southern Sudan before the war. In 1994, she fled to Khartoum. Because of her training as a primary school teacher, she found work in a Catholic primary school there. Akuc and her children were separated from her family for a long time because of the ongoing conflict.

Akuc's life as a refugee started in 1999 when she and her children escaped Sudan for Egypt where she applied for refugee status. Akuc said:

I applied for refugee status and came to Australia. It's good for my children, my life now. I'm very happy because of the educational opportunities.

The program at Mamre was perfect for Akuc because free childcare was provided on site. Akuc said:

It's hard for us to find childcare so we put that program down for us. We learnt about English and more about the garden. We learnt about Italian food and we even taught the teachers about our own food. We learnt about how to make pizza, lasagna, salad, cakes, and biscuits.

The problem is that the way we cook in Australia is totally different from the way we cook in Africa. Australian food is dry but what we do is different. If I go to the shops and I want to cook Australian food, I don't know which food goes with what. They taught us about ingredients and how to find and cook them.

photo > Akuc and Najah Kerbaj, a multicultural liaison officer at Centrelink, Penrith



'I applied for refugee status and came to Australia. It's good for my children, my life now. I'm very happy because of the educational opportunities.' The program at Mamre was perfect for Akuc because free childcare was provided on-site.

- take a long-term, sustainable approach to ensure the complex needs of the community are met
- use a partnership approach to project planning, implementation and management.

Funding

- From February 2005 until June 2005 Centrelink provided funding for transport, cooking ingredients and other incidental costs through its *Jobs, Education and Training Program* financial incentives scheme.
- In 2005, the project received a grant from Sydney West Area Health Service to support the provision of workshops on drug, alcohol and parenting issues.
- Penrith City Council made the formation of the garden possible through a grant from its *Community Assistance Program*.
- Funding for 'A Safer Path', a mosaic project on safety issues for the women in 2006, was secured through the Sydney West Area Health Service.
- NRMA and University of Queensland funding supported the provision of programs on road safety and exercise in 2006–07.
- The Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs partially funded childcare from February 2005 through to the present.
- Project partners contributed in-kind resources such as the venue, transport, worker hours, management and administration.

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