

INQUIRY INTO MULTICULTURALISM IN AUSTRALIA

To the Joint Standing Committee on Migration,

The Yarra Settlement Forum (YSF) would like to comment on the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia. Representing over 20 key services based in the City of Yarra (CoY), the YSF is the peak body responsible for advocating on settlement issues relating to migrants and refugees in within the municipality of Yarra made up of inner city suburbs in Melbourne.

We applaud the Federal Government for providing opportunities for communities and individuals to contribute to the Inquiry. The forum believes that discussion about Multiculturalism is a positive step to creating a harmonious society that is founded on diversity. That discussion needs to be honest with space and time for all to contribute.

On a broad level the YSF members hold a concern that the term ‘multiculturalism’ tends to focus exclusively on people who have migrated to Australia and therefore can tend to exclude those born here, whether they are descendants of people who arrived after 1788 and/or Indigenous Australian peoples. We acknowledge that Australia is a nation with a very diverse population and that any discussion of multiculturalism needs to be inclusive of all. Whilst recognising the complexity of issues for both Refugees and Asylum Seekers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, we believe that any consideration of multiculturalism in Australia cannot really be complete without the consideration and inclusion of all people in this country.

Australia has a history of celebrating multiculturalism well on a community level, where we honour the music, food and creative talents of different groups. Yet, as a nation, we vilify and malign others who are different and who seek asylum in our country. The obvious tension that this creates is evidenced in the lack of community understanding of the issues that contribute to people seeking asylum and a lack of community willingness to assist asylum seekers in their quest for safety.

The practice of detaining asylum seekers contributes to that lack of understanding and the desire of Australians to meet our International obligations in a humane manner. Furthermore, the practice of detention impacts on the asylum seeker’s ability to successfully settle, thereby also increasing the costs of settlement both for the individual but also for our society. The cost of settlement is a cause of concern for many in the public and the significantly greater costs caused by detaining asylum seekers therefore adds to this concern, and creates increased barriers to the building of understanding and embracing of refugees. Additionally, many refugees and asylum seekers have come from war torn areas and or have suffered significant persecution. Mental health issues are therefore a common health issue in refugee cohorts. These mental health conditions can be greatly exacerbated by the detention experience. Given that approximately 90% of all asylum seekers are found to be genuine refugees, and that the Australian health and welfare system will eventually be called upon to assist these people with these health concerns, this does not make good fiscal sense. It is also not humane treatment of people suffering trauma and possible torture.

We wish to also take this opportunity to provide our perspective on children and detention as it is of significant concern.

The issue of children in detention was highlighted most significantly for members of the YSF when the children who attended the funeral of family members were returned to Christmas Island unnecessarily. While we have heard justifications for this they fail to stack up against what is surely in the best mental or physical interests of the children, to stay within a community with support and care while they suffer through the grieving process.

Our foremost concern is that children are placed within the detention system at all. Children should be allowed to live with their parents within the care of the community where they are able to access appropriate services and be in situations where their mental and physical health are not compromised. This concern applies not just to those families who have children but also to the unaccompanied minors who do not have the support and care of close relatives with them. Their mental health is likely to be in a much more fragile state than those within a family. The Age (Russell Skelton, February 10, 2011) reports that “the centres’ now hold a record 1043 minors, 463 of them unaccompanied”.

Members of the YSF have also raised concerns about the length of time it is taking to process the applications of asylum seekers and especially those families with children. Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young told the Senate Estimates Committee that she knew of a family who had been in detention for over 14 months. "Three kids, under the age of 9, [are] being held in detention indefinitely, despite the fact that they are refugees, and we are still keeping them locked up," she said (ABC News Wed Mar 2, 2011). This treatment of asylum seekers is objectionable at best, but of children, it is abhorrent.

It is of concern that ASIO checks may be contributing to the extraordinary delays in processing and releasing families from detention. We understand the need for the security checks; however, we would like to see a commitment from ASIO to undertake them within a reasonable time frame, especially when the delay has significant consequences and impacts on vulnerable and fragile children.

Russell Skelton (The Age, Friday March 4 2011) reported that, even within the immigration department, “there is the belief that ASIO ... is compromising the whole immigration processing system, particularly in regard to expediting security clearances for asylum seekers.” This lack of efficacy is impacting not just directly on children whose release into the community is significantly delayed but in the quality of time they do spend in the detention centres. Apprehension around the conditions created in the detention centres due to overcrowding is growing. Reports of a rise in self harm and violence are increasing, and the effects on children witnessing these incidents are well documented.

It is our wish that children are not detained within the immigration detention system at all and instead are housed within the community setting, where they can avoid the consequences of detention. If children must be detained in some way then we ask that the time frame for releasing them be of the shortest duration possible and that

agencies such as ASIO be a part of the solution to better and healthier care of children within Australia's detention system.

The members of the forum are also concerned about the apparent dysfunction that is occurring at the Christmas Island Detention Centre and we call for a swift and just cessation of the practice of detaining individuals outside the community.

We believe that there is a need for greater understanding on the part of the general public about the facts relating to asylum seekers and refugees. For example, there is a general misconception that the asylum seekers who come to Australia by boat are over running our country; yet the numbers of **illegal** migrants, such as tourists who over stay their visas are far greater than the asylum seeking population who legally have a right to come to our shores under the Refugee Convention which Australia has signed. These sorts of facts need to be disseminated and discussed widely and publicly. The Federal government should prioritise this under Principle 1 of The People of Australia, Australia's Multicultural Policy.

Multiculturalism is a multifaceted and complex issue. Part of the multiplicity is the role religion plays in people's identity and their sense of belonging. Religion needs to be included on the agenda of any discussion around multiculturalism. One of the difficulties the YSF notes is that religion can be used as a political tool in one instance and then used as a unifying or divisive ideology. This creates ambiguity in the mind of the general public, condones attacking other religions and divides people rather than unifying them. Unification is surely a priority for multiculturalism?

Australians seem to have a fear of difference and people we don't understand and know, which in turn fosters racism and discrimination. As we get to know others and their cultural habitats our fear abates and we move towards inclusiveness. This is evidenced through history in the experiences of the various waves of migrants from differing areas of the globe who have initially experienced racism and have subsequently been accepted as integral parts of our society, e.g. the post second world war wave of Italian and Greek migrants . A current example of fear that needs to be addressed concerns the use of cultural symbols and items such as the wearing of the burqa by Muslim women. For a multicultural society to function effectively fears such as this need to be addressed so that the aim to "strengthen social cohesion" (The People of Australia, Australia's Multicultural Policy pg2) is fulfilled. Principle 4 of the Policy provides ample room in which to address these issues.

We note that there is often a further fear to discuss such sensitive issues and it is precisely here that Australia needs strong leadership. We challenge our Federal leaders to take up the baton and begin to create understanding and acceptance in our communities, by engaging in real and open discussion around cultural and religious diversity, including matters that are perceived as being sensitive.

Members of the forum notice that, in our rush to fix issues that are often very complex our State and Federal governments have sought simple solutions. We encourage our Federal leaders to step outside this limited thinking and begin to apply courageous solutions that address the complexity of the issues.

Settlement

Social reform is developed out of experience and we need to use the experience we have had to create better policies, practices and attitudes in the settlement process.

We also see a need for the Federal Government to provide better communication with the Australian public about how it is responding to the refugee crisis and the resulting settlement needs. Greater transparency about the refugees, their plight and the work Australia is doing to help, will assist the public to understand and appreciate the work the Government is undertaking on their behalf.

The members of the YSF believe that abolishing the mandatory five year settlement term (under which refugees are no longer entitled to settlement services after living in the country for five years) would greatly assist the achievement of the goal to promote long term settlement. This would provide significant social and economic benefits for Australian society. The five year term is arbitrary and does not accurately reflect the settlement journey of most refugees.

The premise behind this policy is that after five years, refugees should be able to access mainstream services. However, our experience shows that it can remain difficult for refugees to access mainstream services well after this period of time, for a variety of reasons. Lack of understanding on the part of both the refugee and the mainstream organisation about what are appropriate and realistic expectations is just one example. This leads us to ask the question: Are mainstream services ready to assist refugees? Anecdotal evidence suggests that, while the situation is improving it is taking time and not all mainstream services have the capacity to assist refugees. Our belief is that mainstream services and service providers need to be supported to develop more responsive and appropriate service models that ensure refugee clients have greater access to services that meet their needs.

It is also our collective experience that effective successful settlement is restricted by a seeming failure to provide information to settlement agencies about individual refugees, countries they come from and the cultures and issues those countries predominately hold.

An additional barrier to providing effective and appropriate and responsive services is the non-recurrent funding and the dearth of funding for fulltime ongoing positions within organisations which provide settlement services. Often the funding dilemma necessitates the employment of part time and/or casual staff or short term contracts. This type of employment pattern creates difficulty in providing smooth and seamless service, as well as great uncertainty for staff. The result is often that the highly qualified staff are underemployed. It is difficult to provide ongoing resilient services when funding is so insecure.

While refugees are assisted well when they first arrive in Australia, there is often a great deal of secondary migration that occurs. This creates challenges for the services providing assistance as they are clearly providing settlement services but are often underfunded or not funded at all for such work. This is the case for some services in Yarra which are responding to a significant numbers of refugees who have been housed as a place of secondary settlement, in the large public housing estates in the

municipality. Yarra has the largest number of public housing residences of any municipality in Victoria, and a large proportion of people living on these properties are from refugee backgrounds. As an indication, local public housing data from February 2009 shows that 66.75% of public housing residents in Yarra are from non-English speaking countries and that over 27% of residents of the Collingwood Housing Estate, and 20% of the Fitzroy Housing Estate had an African background. The vast majority of these would be refugees and humanitarian arrivals with very significant health and settlement needs. There is a need to look at the impacts and the resulting requirements of those who are involved in secondary migration, and of the agencies providing support to these people.

Another issue that greatly impacts on the settlement of refugees is the separation of families. The need for family reunion as part of successful resettlement cannot be disregarded. While we understand the need to restrict the number of people entering Australia, we do see a real need to restructure the system so that families can be reunited.

Of major concern for many refugees is the long time frame for suitable and appropriate housing. Many families struggle with meeting their housing needs adequately and the long term impact on families is grave. A long term solution to the housing crisis needs to be addressed for all Australians.

The members of the YSF also have the challenge of dealing with issues that arise out of inner city living. These include; secondary migration, the squeeze placed on communities that necessitates them shifting further out from the city, and thus further away from services and organisations that are equipped to assist them effectively and appropriately, and low income and high housing costs.

Members of the YSF also encourage the Joint Standing Committee on Migration to engage in dialogue with the many Island States in our neighbouring Asia Pacific region about their impending relocation needs as a result of rising sea levels caused by global warming. Assuming Australia plays its part in assisting those affected communities, they will require settlement services. The YSF urges that this situation be given due investigation and consideration now so that responses can be provided in an appropriate and planned way rather than as an emergency response.

National Productive Capacity

The skills and resources that refugees bring with them to this country are often not recognised and acknowledged by communities and employers. Often their skill sets are overlooked and/or the refugees are underemployed. Underemployment can occur because the process and costs to get overseas qualifications recognised and Australian appropriate are prohibitive and overwhelming for refugees. As a nation we miss the opportunities that come from the resulting diversity. Principle 3 of the Multicultural Policy states, "Immigration and cultural diversity have created economic renewal and prosperity in our communities" (p.5). However, if we do not allow all to fully participate we risk losing the "competitive edge in an increasingly globalised world" that a multicultural workforce gives us (*cf. Ibid, p.2*).

We thank the Joint Standing Committee for the opportunity to share our experience and concerns regarding Australia's Multicultural Policy and look forward to positive change as a result.

Yours sincerely

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This submission has been written by Kathi McCulloch, North Yarra Community Health, Co-Convenor with the City of Yarra of the Yarra Settlement Forum. It has been completed in consultation with other YSF partners including representatives from City of Yarra, Fitzroy Learning Network, New Hope Migrant and Refugee Centre and Brotherhood of St Laurence.