



The Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory

Submission on the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS)

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Introduction - The Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT)

First established in 1977, the Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT) based at Malak in Darwin's northern suburbs, is a community-based non-profit organisation managed by a board of dedicated volunteers. The MCNT receives operational funding from the Northern Territory Government's Office of Multicultural Affairs and project funding from various Commonwealth Government agencies.

As the peak multicultural community organisation in the Top End of the Northern Territory, the MCNT represents and advocates for the interests, concerns and aspirations of migrants and refugees - many from non-English speaking backgrounds. It is the aim of service providers such as the MCNT to identify and address barriers to social and economic participation. The MCNT supports cultural diversity and promotes social cohesion.

The MCNT is funded by DIAC's Settlement Grants Program (SGP) to provide services and activities that promote participation and self-reliance for recently-arrived migrant and humanitarian communities and encourage the settlement, inclusion and integration of these new arrivals within the Australian economy and society.

The MCNT's Views on the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS)

The MCNT as a SGP service provider welcomes this opportunity to provide its ideas, views and comments on the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) as part of the consultation and tender process for the delivery of IHSS services from 2010. Melaleuca Refugee Centre is the provider for IHSS services in the Northern Territory to offshore humanitarian entrants - primarily refugees - when they first arrive in our region.

Australia has a commendable history in meeting its international humanitarian obligations in terms of refugee resettlement in the size of its program as well as in the quality of the settlement services provided. On a per capita basis, Australia settles more refugees and spends more on the settlement needs of these refugees than any other country.

Refugee families, having suffered persecution, social dislocation and protracted displacement, inevitably face serious challenges in successfully adjusting to their new environment and re-building their shattered lives in Australia.

The MCNT believes that on balance the IHSS which was developed by DIAC in 1997 as a national framework for improving humanitarian settlement services in Australia, has met its objectives and delivered on its core principles in assisting in the initial settlement of refugees and other humanitarian entrants in Australia.

Melaleuca Refugee Centre was first established in 1996 as a community-based non-profit organisation to cater for the small numbers of refugees and asylum seekers wanting to settle in the Northern Territory. Since 2002, Melaleuca Refugee Centre has delivered IHSS services and is currently one of the 20 contracted IHSS service providers in Australia. The organisation has a commendable record for dedication and innovation in the delivery of IHSS services and enjoys a solid reputation with its clients and stakeholders.

The MCNT in preparing its submission has focused on aspects within the local context in which it is believed there can be improvements in IHSS arrangements and services.

Competitive tendering for the IHSS Contracts

The MCNT welcomes in principle the Federal Government's commitment to a competitive tendering process for IHSS contracts from 2010. The MCNT believes that if this process is managed well it will result in increased collaboration between agencies in the community services sector and greater innovation in IHSS service delivery.

Under the current model of grants funding, from the MCNT's perspective, there is at times the tendency for Melaleuca Refugee Centre the sole IHSS provider in the Northern Territory, to operate in isolation from other CALD-specific (including the MCNT) and mainstream service providers. In recent years there have been improvements in client-centred collaborative arrangements and partnerships between IHSS and SGP providers and other agencies in the Northern Territory in design and delivery of projects and programs.

The MCNT is aware of the concerns about the potential adverse impacts of the competitive tendering process within the community services sector throughout Australia - pressures on effective collaboration between agencies, issues with intellectual property and commercial confidentiality and the considerable resources that need to be allocated to preparing a complex tender. The MCNT recommends to DIAC that these concerns are taken into account in the consultation and tender process for IHSS contracts beyond 2010.

The nature of refugee resettlement in the Northern Territory

The Northern Territory has the reputation of a functional multicultural society with a strong record of successful effective settlement of refugees and migrants over many years. The MCNT believes that DIAC in redefining the IHSS contract regions should consider the impact of relevant structural factors unique to the Territory - specifically its geographical isolation from large southern metropolitan centres and low population base.

The Northern Territory has small dispersed populations of recently-arrived communities and this presents challenges for the cost-effective delivery of IHSS and SGP services. Darwin as a capital city does not enjoy the economies of scale that accrue for larger aggregated refugee communities in southern metropolitan settlements.

Furthermore successful and sound settlement outcomes for the Northern Territory are impacted by the pattern of secondary migration movements and push-pull factors of eastern and southern states that compromise the maintenance of an effective critical mass for recently-arrived and emerging communities in Darwin and regional centres in the Northern Territory. In particular the drift of IHSS clients - specifically Karen and Bhutanese refugees - is of concern to IHSS and SGP service providers in the Northern Territory.

Paradoxically Alice Springs because of its relatively buoyant employment situation is experiencing a wave of secondary migration of post-IHSS African refugees from eastern and southern states which is presenting challenges for the local SGP service provider, the Multicultural Community Services of Central Australia (MCSCA).

The MCNT believes that the awarding of an IHSS contract in the Northern Territory beyond 2010 should be framed in terms of the Federal Government's commitment to supporting sustainable regional settlement throughout Australia.

IHSS delivery should be based on cost-per-service rather than cost-per-unit

The MCNT believes that a cost-per-unit system for prospective IHSS tenders framed within narrow financial parameters has inherent difficulties in budget estimation for a winning bid - particularly for IHSS clients in the Northern Territory - for a number of reasons, and recommends that a cost-per-service system be adopted.

The cost-per-unit system tends to treat all clients as interchangeable when in fact settlement is a complex and unpredictable process and differs markedly from person to person in terms of the type and intensity of the support required. The cost-per-unit system encourages underestimation of the actual cost of service provision and creates an over-reliance on volunteers. The cost-per-service system better recognises the benefits of innovative inter-agency collaboration and provision of additional services to clients during initial settlement beyond IHSS contractual obligations.

The need for more effective transition for clients from IHSS to SGP Programs

The MCNT agrees wholeheartedly with this statement in the Discussion Paper:

"IHSS is part of a broader community service sector in which many organisations are involved in providing services, including settlement services, to humanitarian entrants. The department recognises the importance of IHSS service providers linking entrants to the broader community service sector in a way that is tailored to individual needs and utilises the capacity and expertise of the sector. Supported referrals to other settlement programs, sporting groups, social and community groups, religious and youth groups, provide entrants with an opportunity not only to interact with other new arrivals, but also with the wider Australian community. It is therefore important that IHSS service providers have a strong awareness of the programs run by other government service delivery agencies and the community services sector and make timely referrals so entrants can quickly benefit from these programs".

The MCNT believes that there is the need for smoother transition from, and articulation with, other available multicultural youth, CALD-specific and mainstream services post IHSS. There does not seem to be a formal referral process in the Northern Territory for clients after they exit IHSS.

The SGP program through provision of settlement assistance, information and referral services and facilitates community capacity building is designed to provide complementary services to humanitarian entrants receiving IHSS assistance and is not meant to duplicate the IHSS program and its services. However in the Northern Territory the MCNT is required to use excessive resources in its SGP project to identify and outreach to potential clients when these should have been referred onward from the IHSS provider.

Lack of Youth Focus in the IHSS Program

The Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) and the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) have identified the lack of a youth focus in the IHSS - the current program is focused on families and this means that the needs of young people are often not recognised at an early stage in settlement.

Between the years 2000 and 2009 70% of humanitarian entrants arriving in Australia were under 30 years of age at the time of arrival. Young refugees have specific needs that are quite distinct from older refugees and there are also strong expectations from Government for the seamless integration of young people into mainstream society.

The MCNT believes that there should be a greater recognition and focus in the IHSS program on specific youth issues with well targeted services and activities. There is the need for IHSS service providers to design youth specific programs as part of their IHSS delivery to improve integration and social inclusion for young refugees.

The current timeframe for the IHSS Program should remain

The MCNT believes that the current nominal timeframe of 6 months for the IHSS program is adequate and should not be extended from 6 months to 12 months. It is acknowledged however by the MCNT that there are valid circumstances where this period for certain types of assistance should be extended for vulnerable clients with special needs.

The MCNT believes that greater collaboration and communication with a well-defined transition between the IHSS provider and other CALD-specific and mainstream providers after the first 6 months of settlement in the Northern Territory is in the best interests of the vast majority of recently-arrived humanitarian entrants and the wider community.

While it is acknowledged that intensive assistance through the IHSS program for 6 months after arrival is essential, the MCNT believes that intensive assistance from the sole IHSS provider in the Northern Territory beyond 6 months would provide a "comfort zone" and instill for clients a culture of reliance and dependency on the IHSS program. There is anecdotal evidence that clients even after 6 months are often reluctant to exit IHSS.

The MCNT believes that there should be more IHSS/SGP articulation and that SGP service providers in the Northern Territory (including the MCNT) are the most appropriate agencies to assist these clients with ongoing settlement needs to achieve self-sufficiency and effective participation within Australian society.