

African Settlement Conference

12 April 2007

Joe Caddy Plenary Speech

*Getting a Job- It's not **what** you know- it's **who** you know!*

It is an honour to be invited to speak to you today about the importance of finding a job in assisting the settlement of African refugees and humanitarian entrants in Australia. I will speak from the point of view of my own organisation Centacare Catholic Family Services which has had a long term involvement in assisting to settle the various waves of migrants that have arrived in Australia. Though Centacare in Melbourne is only marginally involved in mainstream employment programs it is a member of Catholic Social Services Australia whose members provide a large number of Job Network services nationally.

One of the keys to successful settlement is finding ongoing employment, preferably work that matches the education and skills of the person seeking work. The security of permanent employment provides those newly arrived, as it does for us all, with the dignity that comes from earning a living for themselves and their family. Success in work instils confidence in one's abilities to move forward in a career, or seek education and training that leads to achieving higher levels of employment with increased income and mobility. For the most part, all new entrants require is a helping hand to direct them toward accessing services that can guide them to find employment. Some though, require more intensive long-term assistance that currently is not readily available to all new entrants for one reason or another.

While providers under the Commonwealth Job Network scheme are required to understand the varying needs of particular job seeking groups in their local area they are not always adequately equipped to assist refugees and humanitarian entrants with multiple barriers to employment or those who, due to circumstances fall outside those entitled to use their services.

The need to provide additional services is evident from the growing number of those refugees who fall outside the net, requiring assistance from Centacare and other non-job network community agencies. Refugees and humanitarian entrants offer a range of

skills and experience that have the potential to add value and richness to the Australian workforce, economy culture and society. The refugee population from Africa include many young adults who, if given the right supports, can be highly resilient and motivated to become active participants in Australian society. Assisting those who already have valuable skills to enter the workforce quickly upon arrival sets an example of good work habits and a healthy work ethic. This in turn makes those people excellent role models for their children and other youth in the refugee community. Refugees who are able to settle successfully can mentor more recent arrivals, they can open doors to potential employers and can inspire the newer arrivals to persevere with programs that will increase their language skills and other training that can create new job opportunities.

The saying goes “It’s not what you know but who you know.” It means if you have credentials without connections you may still find it difficult to find employment. The job seeker with few contacts is less likely to have a friend in the position to introduce them to a potential employer who will recognise their education and skills and give them a chance. In the case of refugees, organisations like Centacare can act on behalf of new arrivals to provide extensive community networking that goes beyond ringing a friend and asking a favour. They can offer a wide range of services aimed at assisting individuals and families when they encounter difficulties in accessing mainstream services or understanding their rights and entitlements available through current government programs.

Many community and church based organisations are in position to help connect refugees and others. My own organisation has been working within the community, in Victoria, for over seventy years and has experience helping families and individuals cope with the uncertainty of life through the provision of family and relationship counselling and other support services. Within our capacity we are well placed to help refugees whose pre-migration experience involves trauma and violence followed by long periods in refugee camps and detention centres before coming to Australia. Programs and services have adapted over the years to attempt to meet the needs and demands of the ever changing and complex community that refugees find themselves coming into upon arrival. We attempt to equip new arrivals with the supports, information and referrals they need to settle in quickly and smoothly so as make the

transition to a new life in Australia as positive an experience as possible. Of course we only scratch the surface and there is much more we and others could do if we had the resources.

Australia has a long history of settling migrants and refugees from all over the globe. No matter where the new arrivals originate from, there are challenges that must be faced both by those attempting to build a new life, and for those in the community who help to organise and facilitate successful settlement. There are common feelings and experiences that new arrivals share with each other. For want of a better phrase, that ‘fish out of water’ feeling that we can all relate to when going to a new school, moving to a new town or neighbourhood or stepping into a new job. However, most Australians are mobile by choice and it is often aspirations that motivate us to leave our jobs and homes with the knowledge that if it doesn’t work out, we can always return to familiar supportive and safe surroundings.

But, African refugees coming to Australia are another story. They are motivated by survival first with aspiration coming way down the list of priorities. When they arrive here the last thing they need is to be faced with a life of further uncertainty and poverty. Meeting their fundamental needs as soon as possible is essential in order to make them feel safe and secure in their new home. Timing is critical in order to prevent new arrivals from losing hope about their prospects for a better future. Many arrive without anyone to make the way easier and having lost or been separated from immediate and extended family members. As such their treatment needs to be sensitive and fair with a focus on having understanding and empathy for their pre-migration experience. Often that requires taking the time to sit and listen, not only to individuals but the refugee community as a whole. To achieve successful settlement outcomes we need to ‘bridge the gap’ between their experience, knowledge and skills in order that they find non-exploitive long-term employment. Some of the current barriers to achieving employment for African refugees and humanitarian entrants include.

- Poor English language and/or literacy skills
- Lack of adequate means of transportation or driving skills

- No family support to care for children when working or seeking employment
- Limited opportunities to establish networks for making job connections
- Uncertainty about accessing available community and government services
- No income and no credit history which makes traditional avenues for obtaining loans problematic
- Lack of understanding of workplace rights leading to potential exploitation
- Some Job Network Providers are not well equipped or focused in such a way as to deal with refugees as clients
- Systems of income security and employment support lack cultural sensitivity
- Language and jargon of Centrelink and Job Network can be incomprehensible
- Employers lack the cultural awareness to help support refugee workers
- Refugees may lack skills or qualifications may not be recognised

A key aspect of any successful settlement program is its ability to strengthen and magnify the chances for refugees to find permanent employment with growth opportunities. It is not enough to just find someone a job. Finding employment is dependent on various factors, while keeping a job depends on others. It needs to be a holistic approach that can deal with all the factors that prevent refugees from finding and maintaining suitable employment. Progress needs to be monitored, without set time limits for providing assistance, as it can take years for new arrivals to truly settle. Among those factors to consider are physical barriers and emotional issues as well as adjustment to the social and cultural differences of their new home. Without an integrated approach to finding employment, settlement of refugees into their new environment can be delayed with permanent consequences for themselves and their families.

Finding safe, adequate housing, learning English, obtaining a drivers license or learning a skill, represent some of the physical barriers that African refugees face upon arrival that can keep them from actively seeking and obtaining permanent employment. Add to this the emotional burden that many carry as a result of their pre-migration experience or time as asylum seekers and concerns about family left behind and the task fitting into society can seem insurmountable to them. There is a need for special services, which focus on addressing those physical barriers and emotional

issues that, as a direct result of their experiences, many refugees require upon arrival. Some of the services required are readily available others however are not. Typical of the services required are:

Employment Support Services

Job Placement Program

Learning Support Services for African Adults and Children

Transitional Housing Service

Access to affordable credit and financial education

Family Support and Counselling Services

Specialist Loss and Grief Peer Support Groups for Children and Adults

Bereavement Counselling

Settlement Case Management for Families

In a limited way Centacare provides each of these services but again more is required.

Sometimes the real challenge comes when refugees, in particular African refugees attempt to hurdle Australian social and cultural barriers. Those arrivals from the African continent are a relatively new addition to the multi-cultural mix and cannot 'blend' into the local community without being noticed as a distinct group. Most Australians are welcoming of all new arrivals, with the majority offering as much sympathy and assistance to African refugees as they possibly can in deference to the pain and suffering that they have experienced. Like every new wave of arrivals, African entrants are often willing to take employment opportunities that many Australians would not be willing to take. They are motivated to take any opportunity to become active members of the community.

Some members of the host community however are suspicious of new arrivals especially those with whose culture they are unfamiliar or if there is a belief that they may take jobs in competition with Australian job seekers. Some would fear that as refugees from differing ethnic and religious backgrounds often settle within the same communities then there would be a high risk of them bringing with them deep feelings of anger and mistrust that can spark conflict here in their new home. In fact by and

large the reverse is true and Australia has an outstanding record of peacefully settling groups of people formerly in conflict.

The burden of adjustment is often made more difficult by the fact that children and young people adjust quickly to the social and cultural differences of their new home. In order to fit in they may begin to exhibit behaviours and attitudes that their parents do not fully understand.

At Centacare we attempt with our programs to address social and cultural differences through community development and education programs that aim to create awareness of the different African groups within the broader community and provide new refugees with opportunities to socialise in a group setting to promote understanding and networking within the refugee community. Advocacy for fairer treatment for entrants can ease the feelings of exclusion that they may encounter when attempting to access employment and other services.

Amongst a number of other a couple of examples of initiatives aimed at addressing social and cultural issues that act as barriers to acceptance in the community include:

- Bridging the Gap: A recent 3-day event where African women from Melbourne participated in a cultural exchange with mainstream Australian women in the regional city of Ballarat. The program aimed to address cultural barriers through shared experiences that highlight both universal similarities as women and unique cultural differences.
- Sudanese and Somali Women's Groups are aimed at encouraging social networks while learning sewing, computer skills and increasing their English language skills. Guest speakers come on a regular basis to discuss parenting and provide practical information on family services.
- African Dad's and Kids Project, recently held a Cricket Clinic and Barbecue at the Sunshine Heights Cricket Club. The project gives an opportunity for African men to spend some fun time with their children and to come together to speak about the realities for them of being a dad in the Australian cultural context. (People advised against this and said don't have Cricket because Sudanese don't play – but their kids do at school!)

- Employment Case Study:

Centacare currently provides in a small way assistance to refugees attempting to find employment using a case management model that offers additional settlement services. Our program though small has taught us some valuable lessons and we are seeking to expand it and to develop partnerships with mainstream Job Network providers. The program is an independent employment support in the manner of Anglicare's Creative Pathways and the Brotherhood of St. Lawrence's program, Given the Chance.

A volunteer, who is a solicitor and well connected with business, approached a friend who had a farming interest in North East Victoria. The friend said that he could use someone with farming experience. A Sudanese married father of four with experience as a mechanic with knowledge of farm equipment was hired to work as a manager on the farm. There was a tremendous amount of community good will and support in this rural area with funds raised for the family to purchase a car. A no interest loan was organised by Centacare to assist the family in finding a place to live. In order to introduce the family to the community, the mother spoke at their children's primary school and other community groups about their pre-migration experience. This exposure led to her being offered a job in Shepparton as an interpreter where the family has since moved.

Most recently in Avenel, two single mothers from Liberia and a couple with four children from Southern Sudan were placed in full-time employment at the local mushroom farm. Our volunteer made contact with the regional St. Vincent de Paul Society that organised a settlement group to help link the families with the local community and social services. After four weeks of employment our support team reviewed each family's situation to find that all were happy and settling well into their new lives. The ability to have someone able to work closely with the local community was key to achieving these successful outcomes. Volunteers who have maturity, experience and networking skills are an essential part of making employment support programs work especially in rural communities where much of the employment opportunities exist for new arrivals. Based on the success of this experience in Avenel we look forward to expanding our employment support services to other areas in and around Melbourne and rural Victoria.

Proposed Centacare Employment Support Program

As a result of the lessons learnt from this experience new initiative is proposed to work directly with Job Network providers offering specialised support for CALD clients, in particular African refugees and humanitarian entrants, who need help with finding employment. The model is designed after our existing programs to provide intensive individual support that includes education and training in basic life, language and job skills, assistance in conducting a job search, job placement and post placement support. The program goals include:

- Outreach into refugee communities to link them to mainstream services.
- Enable refugee job seekers to utilise the current Job Network system by offering job readiness support services that enhance their chances of being offered employment.
- Provide culturally appropriate counselling and information to assist job seekers to understand the labour market and employment support services.
- Provide simultaneous training opportunities such as English language classes in conjunction with basic qualification training.
- Offer advice that directs refugees to appropriate education and training support services that can lead to employment pathways.
- Develop close working relationships with employers, in particular those with similar ethnic backgrounds who are part of the established local community.
- Develop a mentoring program where those who find successful long-term employment provide advice and possibly referral creating a refugee network for job seekers.
- Establish and maintain close networks with the local businesses and community groups that may be able to refer job seekers for employment or volunteer opportunities that provide job seekers with very important local work experience.
- Provide information and assistance about entrepreneurship aimed at exploring small business opportunities for refugees to establish in community.

This approach has proven itself to be successful in managing difficult cases of long-term unemployment for refugee and humanitarian entrants. However support for these services is currently ad hoc making sustainability questionable over the long term.

The federal government's Humanitarian Program currently provides a framework for addressing the settlement issues faced by refugees and humanitarian entrants, including employment. However, the complex nature of the pre-migration experience combined with those barriers mentioned earlier have made a "one size fits all" program ineffective for many entrants, especially those who have suffered severe trauma and loss prior to arrival. In April last year the Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) on Humanitarian Settlement convened to develop a strategy to address the issues faced by entrants who require a high level of support. In October 2006 the then Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Senator the Hon Amanda Vanstone asked for submissions relating to the key recommendations of the Committee. The most relevant to employment outcomes is the development of a Complex Case Support Network (CSSN) under which organisations like Centacare may receive support to provide those extra services that African entrants need for successful resettlement. The Complex Case Support Network acknowledges that this group in particular is at risk of falling through the cracks of the current Job Network provider system. With few in roads into the community the many barriers that this group faces and the difficulty in convincing employers to accept referrals it is not surprising that some Job Network staff will place these potential job entrants into the "too hard basket".

According to the proposal, the Complex Case Support Network will not seek to duplicate other settlement provider services but enhance them by providing additional assistance to entrants with difficult circumstances. A new program in support of employment services will increase the capacity of the government and the community to assist those entrants who have fallen through the cracks of the current Job Network system.

African refugees and humanitarian entrants can escape the consequences of long-term unemployment, the most important being poverty, which can have a devastating effect

both on the broader Australian society and on the refugee families for generations to come. One of the most effective ways of achieving this is to help them into employment. In conclusion what is required for a happy and sustainable employment outcome is:

- Outreach that ensures that they have been listened to and understood
- that they have been connected to services that will help them address their needs
- that they are accompanied and helped to negotiate systems of health, education and job assistance
- that they are connected to opportunities for employment and supported in those roles

The barriers that refugees face can be overcome through a systematic approach to their circumstances creating those advantages that most of us take for granted. That kind of hands on, custom-made support is the only way to ensure their future and to prevent the negative outcomes that are likely to result if no further action is taken.

References

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