

2ND ANNUAL REFUGEE COMMUNITIES ADVOCACY NETWORK VICTORIA CONFERENCE 28 MAY 2016 – REPORT

The conference was initiated by the Refugee Council of Australia and funded by the Victoria State Government.

1.0 Objectives

The aim of the conference was to explore how refugee community leaders could do more for their local communities as a joint advocacy network. The conference focused on strengths within various refugee communities and the need to have a stronger voice on the issues affecting them. The aim of bringing refugee communities together was to gauge interest in forming a state network. The purpose of forming the state network would be to contribute to a national body to have a stronger and more effective influence on key government policy decisions affecting refugee communities.

Paul Power, the CEO of the Refugee Council of Australia, opened the conference with a presentation about what advocacy is, how to influence government decisions and how to present issues to members of parliament. Over 50 people from 19 different refugee communities attended the conference and engaged in discussions about Paul's presentation. The attendees elected focus areas and participated in small workshops to further analyse issues at hand and generate options for action.

2.0 Workshop Summaries

2.1 Family reunion and citizenship delays

Family reunion and citizenship delays are two issues that were high on the agenda for communities present. By virtue of "Direction 62", family reunion applications submitted by refugees arriving by boat have been delayed and transferred to the end of the processing queue, unless Australian Citizenship is attained. Subsequently, this policy further denies people the chance of family reunion due to delays in citizenship processing.

Options for action

- Gather personal stories of those affected and increase the amount of case studies.
- Lobby government to change policy through evidence-based reports.
- Raise awareness within the refugee communities and educate them about avenues for furthering this concern individually and collectively.
- Create petitions to draw support from the wider community.
- Share stories of family separation on social media to draw support.
- Commence legal action against the Minister regarding the delay of citizenships.

2.2 Federal Elections 2016

The main issues identified were the use of refugees and asylum seekers in political scare campaigns regarding "boat arrivals" and the lack of strong political representation.

Pre-election action plans

- Raise awareness by emailing local, state and federal candidates about the issues faced by refugee communities.
- Lobby politicians to gain information about their post-election plans.
- Work together with like-minded organisations to strengthen the voice of refugee communities and influence the election outcome.

- Engage with politicians to advocate for refugee interests, including closing detention centers and community resettlement (or detention) while claims are being assessed.

Post-election: Revision

- Review the results of lobbying politicians by the refugee communities.
- Re-connect with the elected politicians about the continual commitment to their pre-election promises and plans.
- The built relationship should be continued regardless of the achievements.
- This process of lobbying and advocating can similarly be adopted by the refugee community to influence local, state and federal policy.

2.3 Employment

Refugee communities face myriad issues regarding employment opportunities. This is due to a lack of recognised qualifications and resources. Job Active providers do not have the appropriate resources to cater for the needs of refugees. In addition to this, systemic prejudice and discrimination against refugees and former refugees continues to influence employment outcome. Some refugees also raised concerns about various visa categories not allowing work rights.

Options for action

- Lobby for government supported work trials that are refugee specific and provide practical experience.
- Lobby for an increase in Commonwealth supported employment opportunities.
- Reform the Job Active program to target the specific needs of refugees seeking assistance.
- Lift restrictions on access to employment from certain visas.
- Refugee communities should join unions to amplify their voices on a mainstream platform.
- Get involved in programs that provide networking with job providers.
- Advocate and lobby major companies to employ refugees.
- Ensure that Bridging Visa holders are able to benefit from employee entitlements such as FEG/GEERS Scheme.
- Increase cultural awareness in workplaces.
- There is a need for a specific refugee network board that can further strengthen these concerns.

2.4 Networking

The main purpose of the RCAN Conference was to strengthen the network and collaboration efforts between refugee communities. The lack of such networks has led to insufficient representation, misrepresentation and inadequate consultation nationally and internationally for refugee communities. As a consequence, the lack of a common voice has led to the failure of securing resources for funding and developing communities.

Options for action

- In response to the negative attention placed on refugees and their communities, strong leadership from the community is needed to instead portray stories of positivity and success.
- Forming a strong and reputable voice for the refugee community through a network is essential for gaining the support of various sectors including the private sector, NGOs and the Government.
- A network is further needed to illustrate the strength, talent and opinions of the refugee communities.

2.5 Health

Refugees face many difficulties gaining full access to healthcare. This occurs especially with specialized health services and access to basic health practitioners and services. These problems persist mainly due to language barriers and cultural differences.

Options for Action

- The creation of a subsidised interpreting allowance for private health providers.
- Access to healthcare should be extended to visa holders who are not otherwise entitled to Medicare.
- Raising health related issues with the Health Minister in conjunction with organisations advocating for refugee health.

2.6 English Language

Several issues in relation to accessing English language classes were identified during the conference. Some issues included the inadequate length of English language courses and the inflexibility of English language programs making it difficult for refugees to access such services.

Options for Action

- Possible solutions include increasing the tuition hours and a fee exemption mechanism after the completion of 510 hours.

2.7 Funding

The viability of important community based organizations continues to be threatened by a lack of funding. Small communities in particular struggle to gain funding. Some communities commented that applications for funding are often rejected due to their lack of fund management experience. In addition to this, community based organisations mostly depend on a voluntary workforce which is subject to depletion and potentially discontinued operations.

Options for Action

- Communities without experience in applying for or relying on government funding, and who those are at risk of discontinued community support, need to be informed and supported in the funding application.
- Allowing refugee communities access to funding grants more easily would also be of great benefit.

2.8 Women at Risk Program

The original format of the support program for Women at Risk recipients has shifted. There are too few resources available post-arrival in Australia for women at risk. Refugee women having left a life of violence and trauma are highly vulnerable to social isolation, poverty and further violence.

Options for Action

- Women must be given access to English classes, community services and networks to ensure their safety and quality of life in Australia.

2.9 Media

The media has an overarching influence upon public perceptions and representations of refugee communities. To effectively represent refugee communities and issues, short term and long term strategies are required for a greater and lasting impact.

Options for Action

- Short term strategies include producing documentaries, publishing the work of refugee writers and taking part in the mainstream art and music sector.
- To have an effective long term strategy, a dedicated network of refugees working in the media sector would be required to play an effective advocate role in the mainstream media.

3.0 Presentations

Several members of refugee communities gave presentations to the participants and Ministers at the conference. Outlined below is a summary of the presentations and the MPs who attended the conference:

Attending MPs

MPs from both Federal and State parliaments were invited to join the conference, listen to, and respond to the refugee communities. MPs present were:

- Mr Andrew Giles, Federal Member for Sculin
- Mr Robin Scott, state Labor Minister for Multicultural Affairs
- Ellen Sandell, State Member for Melbourne

David Manne

David Manne, the executive director and the principal solicitor from the Refugee Legal, gave a passionate speech about the importance of advocacy led by refugee communities.

Gabriel Yak

PhD Student from the Canberra University, Gabriel Yak, presented an important paper outlining the barriers South Sudanese refugee communities face in education. The paper covers:

- Importance of education for refugee integration
- Inadequate English language programs
- Age issues and school placement
- Lack of information by schools support from parents
- High unemployment is a deterrence to learning
- Gender barriers – women experiencing difficulties schooling

Gabriel's presentation is available at: <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/ourwork/rcan/educational-barriers-facing-south-sudanese-refugees-australia/>

Devi Ghimire

The president of the Bhutanese Community in Australia, Devi Ghimire, gave a powerful presentation outlining the contributions of the Bhutanese Community in Australia and the issues the community faces in settlement. Devi also put forward proposals to address these issues, including investigating the possibility of community-led labor hire businesses and the importance of increasing funding for refugee community associations. This presentation highlighted the strength of refugee communities, as recognized in RCOA's report The Strength Within.

Devi's presentation is available at: <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/ourwork/bhutanese-community-australia-strength-refugee-community-associations/>

Arif Hazara and one person seeking asylum

Arif Hazara and one person seeking asylum (who can't be named) gave a passionate presentation on the barriers that people seeking asylum face in accessing TAFE, university and further education. They called on MPs present to implement policy change to allow all people access to funding for further education.

4.0 Action plans for further developments

The need for a stronger presence through a refugee network has been identified by the refugee communities. The refugee communities showed great support for the formation of an independent refugee network to amplify their collective voices in a broader and a more effective manner. The collaborative effort of individual communities working together will strengthen their ability to influence law and policy, public perceptions, common concerns and further develop the refugee communities.

The principle driver of the network is unity and although each individual refugee community is different, it is important that these differences do not fracture the unity of refugee communities as a collective.

In order for the network to be success it was recommended that operating in a hierarchical manner should be avoided. The adoption of an inclusive structure that is objective-oriented and has consistency in its message and representation throughout Australia is ideal. The conference concluded on the note:

“Let us think and work in a way that reflects our collective voice.”