

Office of Multicultural Interests

Response to “Australia’s children: safe and well: A national framework for protecting children: a discussion paper”

7 July 2008

Introduction

The Office of Multicultural Interests (OMI) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to “Australia’s children: safe and well: a national framework for protecting children: a discussion paper,” released by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) in May 2008.

Many of the issues raised in the discussion paper are beyond OMI’s area of expertise, and so are not addressed in this submission. Based on available research and reports, OMI has identified a number of points at which the framework could be strengthened, or choices taken from among the options presented in the discussion paper, so as to ensure that the framework affords an adequate level of protection to children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) backgrounds. These points are raised below, in relation to the options explored in the discussion paper.

“Option for inclusion in national framework for protection children: Better use of early intervention family support services to support child protection”

Access to Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy services for twelve months

OMI strongly supports improving the capacity of services for newly arrived migrants, particularly humanitarian entrants, to assist them with parenting in Australia. Such people need culturally appropriate support and counselling, delivered by staff who are culturally competent and who are sensitive to the particular situations and experiences of CaLD clients. Several programs currently provide such services to humanitarian entrants.

Foremost is the Department of Immigration and Citizenship’s (DIAC) Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS). IHSS provides a range of services to humanitarian arrivals.¹ However, services are currently available for only six months after arrival. An across-government working party on settlement issues for African humanitarian entrants identified the cut-off point as too early,² and the funding for parenting programs as inadequate.³ As DIAC has noted, ‘the psychological effect of trauma may not be evident in the early settlement period,’ when entrants are dealing with more immediate needs.⁴

OMI recommends that:

1. *DIAC give consideration to extending access to services under the IHSS from six months to twelve months, for eligible visa holders.*

Use of Integrated Service Centres to deliver additional services

While the IHSS provides services for humanitarian arrivals after their initial entry into the community, some humanitarian arrivals would benefit from access to such services over a longer period. This could be provided on a comparatively low budget by funding non-government organisations to deliver services based at existing community facilities.

A model for such an approach has been developed in Western Australia. A pilot project funded by OMI, in partnership with the WA Department of Education and Training (DET) and the WA Department of Health (DoH), established two Integrated Services Centres (ISCs) in July 2007.⁵ The ISCs provide critical relevant services (including parenting support) to

humanitarian entrants no longer eligible for the IHSS. Employing the concept of 'schools as hubs,' they are located at primary schools that also host Intensive English Centres, in proximity to concentrations of humanitarian entrants. The holistic ISC funding and service delivery model, under which government facilitates the provision of key services by both government and non-government organisations, in a government setting, is worth considering for broader application. Further details on this project can be obtained from OMI.

OMI recommends that:

2. *DIAC and FaHCSIA give consideration to the 'Integrated Services Centre model' as a practical, cost-effective means of working with the community sector to provide critical relevant services, including parenting support, to humanitarian entrants no longer eligible for the IHSS.*

Increased funding for other support programs and services

An alternative means of delivering parenting support is through additional funding for existing specialist organisations that cater to the needs of humanitarian entrants. For example, Association for Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors (ASeTTS) provides the following programs to eligible CaLD families:⁶

- Families in Cultural Transition Programme (FICT), a series of workshops designed for refugees in Western Australia, with the aim of simplifying the process of understanding and adjusting to their new environment. Bicultural facilitators are trained to conduct the programme in small groups within their own communities.
- Strength to Strength, which aims to help refugee families build stronger relationships. The program provides counselling, information, community development and advocacy for families, children, couples and individuals of all ages.

Such programs can be delivered cost-effectively through specialist non-government organisations such as ASeTTS, although additional resourcing would be required. One means of providing of providing additional support for such services would be through a dedicated funding stream within DIAC's Settlement Grants Program (SGP). Such funding would not need to target humanitarian arrivals exclusively, but could potentially also reach other new CaLD arrivals who would benefit from parenting support or family counselling.

OMI also notes that some parents from CaLD backgrounds who are new to Australia may have fears and negative perceptions of child welfare services.⁷ If these are not addressed, the positive impact of parenting support programs may be limited.

OMI recommends that:

3. *FaHCSIA and/or DIAC provide additional funding for culturally appropriate parenting support programs for new CaLD migrants.*
4. *FaHCSIA and/or DIAC provide additional support for cultural awareness programs or other means of addressing some CaLD parents' negative perceptions of child welfare services.*

“Option for inclusion in national framework for protection children: Promotion of good parenting”

Culturally appropriate promotion of good parenting

Mainstream public health campaigns on good parenting will have greater effectiveness if they are mindful of the cultural sensitivities of ethnic communities in Australia. Provision of public health information in languages other than English will be necessary to reach some new CaLD migrants. Key documents need to be available in languages other than English,⁸ and access to interpreter services may be required where public health messages are being communicated in person.

It is noted that for some members of new and emerging communities in particular, translated written material will not be an effective communication medium, due to a lack of literacy in their own language.

OMI recommends that:

5. *Public health campaigns in support of good parenting be culturally sensitive, including provision of interpreters where required, and translation of key public health information into languages other than English.*

“Option for inclusion in national framework for protection children: A national mechanism to plan future work and investment”

Specific consideration of CaLD groups in the national mechanism

OMI supports the proposal to develop a national mechanism to plan future work and investment in child protection. Such an approach will function best if it is truly comprehensive, and in particular if there is specific consideration given to CaLD groups in the Australian community. For example, work to identify gaps in programs to build parenting skills should identify programs available to the various categories of new CaLD arrivals.

OMI recommends that:

6. *Any national mechanism to plan future work and investments in relation to child protection give particular consideration to CaLD groups in the Australian community.*

“Option for inclusion in national framework for protection children: National standards and monitoring of the out-of-home care system”

Cultural sensitivity in out-of-home care

Some CaLD children in the out-of-home care system face particular challenges, such as limited English skills, limited experience of Australian culture, or a history of trauma or torture. Cultural sensitivity should be a priority in all aspects of providing short and long term out-of-home care to children from CaLD backgrounds. Professionals, public servants and community workers in the field of out-of-home care need cultural competency training to engage sensitively with children from CaLD backgrounds. Both short term accommodation and foster care need to provide culturally appropriate placements for such children, as is the case for Indigenous children.

OMI recommends that:

7. *Workers in the field of out-of-home care be provided with cultural competency training if they are likely to work with CaLD children.*
8. *Culturally-appropriate placements be prioritised when providing short and long term out-of-home care to children from CaLD backgrounds.*

Siblings as carers in CaLD families

OMI draws FaHCSIA’s attention to the fact that the category of informal/kinship carers includes a small but significant group of sibling carers. For example, some CaLD young people in Australia (including humanitarian entrants who may be coming from particularly traumatic backgrounds) are heads of households or informal carers for their siblings. CaLD young people in this situation face significant responsibilities and opportunity costs (such as limitations on their ability to pursue their education). They may have distinctive needs, for example in accessing transport, or for culturally sensitive parenting/care support.

OMI recommends that:

9. *The child protection framework acknowledge that siblings may provide informal care and that CaLD young people who care for siblings may require additional support.*

“Option for inclusion in national framework for protection children: support for foster carers and informal carers”

Additional risk factors for homelessness among some CaLD migrants

Homelessness is identified, under this Option, as an issue intersecting with provision of foster and informal care. OMI strongly supports this contention. OMI notes that high and rising rents, insecurity of tenure, and direct discrimination against people of CaLD backgrounds (particularly people who are visibly different, such as Australians from an African or Middle-Eastern background) are increasing housing stress and the risk of homelessness for these people.⁹ Although Commonwealth Rent Assistance is available to many new CaLD arrivals, it has not kept pace with rising rents in the private rental market in rapidly growing cities such as Perth, and leaves many recipients in housing stress.

In Western Australia, the diminution of public housing to around 4.2% of total housing stock, and the shortage of public housing suitable for the large families now coming to Australia as humanitarian arrivals, place greater pressure on the private rental market, and also increase the risk of homelessness.¹⁰ These problems are probably present to some degree in the other states.

A holistic response to homelessness in Australia needs to address the additional housing challenges faced by some people from CaLD backgrounds, and to take a preventative approach to homelessness by addressing rental affordability, insecurity of tenure, discrimination by landlords or real estate agents, and other barriers to the right to adequate housing articulated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Australia is a signatory.

OMI recommends that:

10. *The Government’s long-term strategy to reduce homelessness address barriers such as discrimination and lack of suitable public housing stock, that increase the vulnerability of CaLD individuals and families to homelessness.*
11. *The Department for Human Services determine Commonwealth Rent Assistance on an individual state/territory basis.*

“Option for inclusion in national framework for protection children: Improved assistance for young people leaving care”

CaLD young people leaving care

Young people from CaLD backgrounds leaving care need support and guidance to find pathways to further education, training and employment. CaLD young people are often unaware of or unable to access employment or career guidance information and services. The maze of services, courses and programs is difficult to negotiate; limited English may reduce CaLD young people’s success in education and in the workplace; and qualifications or skills obtained outside Australia may not be recognised here. It is vital that that culturally appropriate support be provided to CaLD young people leaving care, to assist them in understanding the available options regarding education, training and employment.

Programs targeted at school-age CaLD children, such as the WA Department of Education and Training’s career education program, delivered to 16-19 year-olds through Intensive English Centres located at state schools, would have the potential to reach CaLD young people still living in care.¹¹ The ISCs referred to above include the services of a Career Development Worker who works directly with the students and their families.

Access to culturally appropriate employment services may be limited in future by proposed changes to the delivery of employment services in Australia, which have the potential to reduce the viability of specialist employment agencies focusing on CaLD job seekers.¹² OMI supports the ongoing delivery of employment services to CaLD job seekers (including CaLD young people) through specialist employment agencies.

OMI recommends that:

12. *FAHCSIA and/or other relevant federal and state departments provide additional funding for programs informing CaLD young people about available career guidance services*

13. *FaHCSIA, in conjunction with relevant federal and state departments, identify the range of existing career advisory services and programs currently being delivered to CaLD school students, and evaluate their potential to reach CaLD young people living in care.*

“Option for inclusion in national framework for protection children: National standards and performance reporting”

Cultural sensitivity in responding to reports of child abuse

OMI supports the promotion of culturally competencies for child protection and welfare workers identified under this Option. OMI additionally suggests that workers from CaLD backgrounds, or bi-cultural workers, will be of particular value in the sensitive activity of responding to reports of child abuse. In addition, and including where such workers are available, unless they are appropriately qualified, the provision of qualified interpreter services where required will be vital to support the person making the report, and to ensure that all allegations are recorded accurately.

OMI recommends that:

14. *Priority be given, at all levels of government, to recruitment of child protection and welfare workers who are from CaLD backgrounds, or bi-cultural workers, and the use of qualified interpreters where appropriate.*

Obligation to intervene

Cultural sensitivity and competence are vital in responding to reports of child abuse by members of CaLD communities. However, OMI does not believe that concern about cultural sensitivities ever justifies a failure to intervene when a child is identified as at risk according to official indicators of child wellbeing, and where official standards recommend intervention.

OMI recommends that

15. *National standards for dealing with vulnerable children at each stage of the protective cycle apply to all children without exception.*

End Notes

¹ All humanitarian visa subclasses have access to trauma and torture counselling under the IHSS; however, some subclass holders are only eligible for counselling if they access the service immediately upon entering the community.

² Across-Government Working Party on Settlement Issues for African Humanitarian Entrants, 2007. Final report, p.6.

³ Across-Government Working Party on Settlement Issues for African Humanitarian Entrants, 2007, p.6.

⁴ Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2007. Western Australia: settlement trends and needs of new arrivals 2007, p.24.

⁵ An independent evaluation found that the project had achieved its major objectives, and recommended extending it to other locations.

⁶ Further details about programs provided by ASeTTS are available at <http://www.asetts.org.au/>.

⁷ Across-Government Working Party on Settlement Issues for African Humanitarian Entrants, 2007, p. 21.

⁸ Research conducted by OMI in 2008 identified the following twelve languages as the most important for provision of information to CaLD groups: Amharic (Ethiopia), Arabic, Burmese, Dari (Afghanistan), Dinka (Sudan) Farsi, Kirundi (Burundi and surrounding regions), Indonesian, Mandarin, Serbian and Swahili (south-east Africa) and Vietnamese.

⁹ Housing Crisis Committee for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities, 2008. Gaps in housing and support services for humanitarian entrants (Joint Community Sector Report) pp.11-12. Available at http://www.shelterwa.org.au/publications/papers_reports/2008/Gaps_in_Housing_and_Support_for_Humanitarian_Communities.pdf.

¹⁰ Auditor General of Western Australia 2008. "Lost in transition: state services for humanitarian entrants." Available at http://www.audit.wa.gov.au/reports/report2008_03.html.

¹¹ More information about Intensive English Centres is available at <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/esl/esl4.htm>.

¹² OMI explored these issues in more detail in its June 2008 submission to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' recent discussion paper, "The future of employment services in Australia," a copy of which can be obtained from OMI.

List of recommendations

OMI recommends that:

1. *DIAC give consideration to extending access to services under the IHSS from six months to twelve months, for eligible visa holders.*
2. *DIAC and FaHCSIA give consideration to the 'Integrated Services Centre model' as a practical, cost-effective means of working with the community sector to provide critical relevant services, including parenting support, to humanitarian entrants no longer eligible for the IHSS.*
3. *FaHCSIA and/or DIAC provide additional funding for the provision of culturally appropriate parenting support programs and services for new CaLD migrants.*
4. *FaHCSIA and/or DIAC consider providing additional support for cultural awareness programs or other means of addressing some CaLD parents' negative perceptions of child welfare services.*
5. *Public health campaigns in support of good parenting be culturally sensitive, including provision of interpreters where required, and translation of key public health information into languages other than English.*
6. *Any national mechanism to plan future work and investments in relation to child protection give particular consideration to CaLD groups in the Australian community.*
7. *Workers in the field of out-of-home care be provided with cultural competency training if they are likely to work with CaLD children.*
8. *Culturally-appropriate placements be prioritised when providing short and long term out-of-home care to children from CaLD backgrounds.*
9. *The child protection framework acknowledge that siblings may provide informal care and that CaLD young people who care for siblings may require additional support.*
10. *The Government's long-term strategy to reduce homelessness address barriers such as discrimination and lack of suitable public housing stock, that increase the vulnerability of CaLD individuals and families to homelessness.*
11. *The Department for Human Services determine Commonwealth Rent Assistance on an individual state/territory basis.*
12. *FAHCSIA and/or other relevant federal and state departments provide additional funding for programs informing CaLD young people about available career guidance services*
13. *FaHCSIA, in conjunction with relevant federal and state departments, identify the range of existing career advisory services and programs currently being delivered to CaLD school students, and evaluate their potential to reach CaLD young people living in care.*
14. *Priority be given, at all levels of government, to recruitment of child protection and welfare workers who are from CaLD backgrounds, or bi-cultural workers, and the use of qualified interpreters where appropriate.*
15. *National standards for dealing with vulnerable children at each stage of the protective cycle apply to all children without exception.*