

Addressing the challenges together

Consultations with Brotherhood clients

In May 2001, the Research and Policy Centre (RPC) of the Brotherhood of St Laurence conducted consultations with five groups of Brotherhood clients to better understand the challenges they faced and provide them with an opportunity to shape the direction of Brotherhood programs, services, and research and advocacy work. Some 41 people—including teenagers, parents, refugees/migrants, jobseekers and older clients—were involved in focus groups at various Brotherhood centres in Fitzroy, Frankston and Craigieburn. The consultations allowed clients to make recommendations as to how their social and economic wellbeing might be improved, with a view to informing the Brotherhood's strategic plan for 2012–14.

Key points

These are the key barriers that clients said prevented them from leading a full life, which could be improved:

- **The cost of living and inadequate government income support** created challenges for clients. People struggled to afford food, petrol and school-related items. Rising utility costs were a particular burden. The high cost of housing—both rental accommodation and residential care—was an added strain. The current levels of government income support were thought to be inadequate in helping those on low incomes lead lives of dignity.
- **Access to health care and medicines** was a challenge for younger and older clients alike. A shortage of skilled and caring GPs and specialists was noted. Likewise, people suffering from serious illness struggled to pay for medicines excluded from the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.
- **Exclusion, stigma and discrimination** were further issues. Clients said that due to their low income they were effectively excluded from some forms of government assistance (e.g. the First Home Owner Grant and the former Solar Homes and Communities Plan Rebate for solar panels). Moreover, they felt it was unfair that these benefits came without the community stigma that clients

observed was attached to income support payments. For refugee clients seeking employment and a new life in Australia, this stigma was heightened by incorrect assumptions, discrimination and racism.

- **Pathways into work** were the main priority of CALD clients. Challenges included getting prior skills and qualifications recognised, and accessing training that provided a genuine pathway into employment. The difficulty in building networks with potential employers, particularly those willing to give opportunities to refugees, was identified as a further barrier.
- **Social participation and recreation** were an issue among older clients and their carers, who valued opportunities to socialise, do activities and get out and about, but had limited chance to participate due to high demand for available programs. Likewise, for working parents (and especially single parents), juggling low-paid employment with household and caring responsibilities meant there was little scope for recreation, social or community participation.

Background

Every three years the Brotherhood conducts a comprehensive strategic planning process in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. staff, community) and with reference to the Victorian and Australian political environment. The outcome is the development of an organisational strategy which guides the services, programs and activities of the Brotherhood for the next three-year period. Consultations with clients were conducted as part of this process in 2008 and again this year to ensure that clients have the opportunity to shape the services that affect them. Each of the consultations consisted of a 60-minute focus group and completion of a short survey. Key findings from the discussion groups and survey are presented in this research summary.

The research

The 2011 consultation indicated that many of the issues facing clients now are the same as those identified in 2008. The cost of living, including housing, and the inadequacy of government income support were a focus then too, as were health and employment. Additional challenges identified in this recent consultation relate to exclusion from some forms of government assistance, stigma and discrimination, and limited social participation.

Cost of living and inadequate government income support

Foremost among client concerns was the cost of living, which has increased at a far greater rate than wages, making it hard to survive on government income support. Rising utilities costs placed a considerable burden on households, particularly on elderly and ill clients who were home during the day.

Rose¹: Up until last week I was too scared to put the heater on to keep warm. I'm scared of the bills coming in ... You're in a lot of pain all the time, so you really don't need that extra burden on you because of the finance going up.

The cost of food (particularly fresh fruit and vegetables), petrol, public transport fares and school expenses posed difficulties for many. The cost of housing (both private rental and residential care costs) compounded these difficulties. Elsie said that residential accommodation consumed so much of her pension that there was little left over to purchase additional food or personal items. One student described the housing problems of young people in Frankston this way:

Lisa: It's the money and being under-age and references are harder to get. And then even if you're living with your parents, just say your parents are going down a real bad track with credit ... You have to try and fix their problems ... eventually the whole family is homeless anyway.

Clients asked that the Brotherhood run programs to improve access to fresh fruit and vegetables, and workshops to provide tips on locating housing. They also called for financial advice services to help manage costs.

Recommendations to government that the Brotherhood could address in its work included:

- reducing the percentage of the pension that could be taken by residential care facilities
- increasing the wages and decreasing the tax of low-paid workers
- providing low-paid workers with access to emergency relief and counselling services
- introducing solar power and water tanks in government housing to reduce utility costs
- intervening to reduce the high cost of private rentals and introduce a New Renters Scheme that provides a housing subsidy which is reduced as earnings increase
- providing free public transport for children and young people in school or equivalent education.

Access to health care and medicines

Timely access to doctors and specialists was identified as an important issue by the Craigieburn parents' group. As Cathy said: "Can I make an appointment with the doctor in six weeks' time please, I might be sick!" You can't get in'. Some clients lacked confidence in both the skill and care demonstrated by local doctors. Over-booking meant doctors spent very little time with patients, emergencies were turned away and Mike described how a misdiagnosis meant his son suffered needlessly for several weeks with an infection. Several clients travelled long distances for specialists, noting that their practice rooms tended to be in more affluent suburbs but not in the outer northern suburbs.

Access to vital medicines was a further issue for both Craigieburn parents and the group of carers and older clients from Fitzroy and Frankston. A number of clients had chronic and even life-threatening illnesses but struggled to pay for their medicines because these were not included in the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Jenny said she spent \$200 on medicine every couple of weeks.

Recommendations to government that the Brotherhood could address in its work included:

- ensuring timely access to skilled and caring doctors in all suburbs
- ensuring that essential medications for people with severe illness are free or included in the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

Exclusion, stigma and discrimination

Clients observed that some forms of government assistance were inaccessible to those on low incomes:

¹ Names used in this report are not clients' real names.

Barry: They're getting First Home Buyers [grants] and I think [sarcastically] good on them. I reckon people like us, we can't even get a First Home Buyers. I would have loved First Home Buyers, I would have bought a house. I would have bought a bloody house but I can't.

Lorraine: [In referring to the the former Solar Homes and Communities Plan Rebate for solar panels:] They keep saying it's only \$2000 if you buy it before July. Who the hell has got \$2000?

In conjunction with Lorraine's comment about solar panels, Barry added that it was 'good enough for them—the mongrels'. When asked to clarify who he was referring to he said, 'Well, the people who can afford it ... [while we are] getting left behind'.

Clients reflected on the impact and stigma associated with government income support, particularly in comparison to these other forms of government assistance. Lorraine went on to describe how major illness and reliance on benefits had altered her family's lifestyle and how the inadequacy of payments and social attitudes impacted on their dignity. She said, you are expected to 'be thankful for what you're getting, which I find quite insulting'.

Traumatic life changes and social attitudes also impacted refugees, who while trying to become established said they were seen as people on 'welfare' by some others in the community. Lack of sensitivity, respect and understanding by Centrelink and Job Services Australia staff left clients feeling 'attacked' and as though they were 'just enjoying the money', when employment was the primary aspiration of this group:

Adam: I told them: 'Nobody is looking for a job more than myself. It is not you, you make it to be your case, but it is my problem. You don't know how much I am looking for the job, you know? [A] job will change my life.'

Breaking free of the incorrect assumptions made about refugees was seen as critical, given lack of opportunity as well as discrimination by employers. Bart, a young African refugee, said that even though he had gone to school and university in Australia, his visibility and the assumption he was a newcomer reduced his employment prospects: 'The assumption is that I'm just a refugee and I don't know anything'. Additionally, clients said racist wedge politics worked to 'hurt' communities:

Eddie: Even the government is racist because they say a racial thing for their political benefit to fleece a certain group ... and that is where everything gets

worse. Whenever there is something that is political said about a certain group, you're going to affect everything. A lot of people will be fired from their job. Wherever you go, whatever group ... you are always assumed to be the less[er] person—the person who doesn't know much.

Participants recommended that the Brotherhood organise multicultural meetings and media opportunities so refugees can dispel myths.

Recommendations to government that the Brotherhood could address in its work included:

- ensuring that policy and programs are sensitive to and respectful of cultural difference
- encouraging politicians to stop making racist generalisations for political gain.

Pathways into work

A critical challenge for refugee and CALD clients was locating genuine pathways into employment. One difficulty identified was building networks of personal contacts to gain employment. Vakasa believed that employers 'choose the people they want before they advertise the job'. Likewise, several clients sought entry-level work in hospitals and childcare centres but were frustrated that, even as locals, if they didn't have contacts they would miss out while those with networks living long distances away got the jobs.

A key barrier was getting recognition for skills and qualifications gained overseas. Many had retrained in Australia, some several times, but like Alyssa found that their certificates were 'useless' as they failed to lead to employment. Lyn said that rather than running these courses, training organisations should partner with employers who would guarantee jobs and specify the skills they wanted taught to potential employees. She recommended that the Brotherhood adopt this approach.

The group also recommended that given the benefits they experienced from the Brotherhood's Centre for Work and Learning a second centre be opened in Frankston, and that employment support and job clubs for refugees also be provided in community centres.

Recommendations to government that the Brotherhood could address in its work included:

- encouraging the government to provide jobs as part of the settlement of refugees

- encouraging the federal government to train refugees to fill skill shortages rather than importing migrants
- ensuring that local applicants be considered first for employment vacancies in their area
- offering refugee-specific services through Job Network Australia providers
- providing community-based cultural liaison workers for more-recent arrivals to support children's participation at school and improve the learning and settlement of refugee adults.

Social participation and recreation

Both the Craigieburn parents and the group of older clients and carers highlighted social participation as a challenge. Older clients expressed their appreciation for the activities the Brotherhood already offered, one saying they enjoyed meeting people, which 'gives you a reason to get up, get dolled up and have a shower and start living'. However, demand for these activities, particularly in Frankston, sometimes surpassed supply, meaning that some people missed out.

A recommendation to the Brotherhood was that the capacity of these programs be increased—with more qualified staff and increased opportunities to do popular activities such as water aerobics, craft, computer and mobile phone classes as well as trips to places like the zoo and cinema.

For working parents the barriers to social participation and recreation were different. Clients reflected that they worked hard and yet had no resources or time left for leisure:

Dave: If you've worked and you sort of fit into the medium bracket, it's still very, very hard and [you are] probably lucky to have \$20 a week left over for recreation or whatever, which is really disheartening because back when I was a child going back 25 years ago, when you worked, you actually had something and now it's not the case at all, you work just to survive.

Cathy and her family lived on a low income and struggled to make ends meet. Her working hours were 6.30 am to 5.30 at night, after which home duties—caring for children, cooking and cleaning—occupied her evening. This meant that she did not get the chance to interact with other adults socially aside from her husband. For single parent Jane, who was balancing shiftwork with children and without family to provide support, finding time for recreation was also difficult.

This group recommended that the Brotherhood introduce a social activities program that provided child care for working parents.

Conclusion

In this review, Brotherhood clients said the things that prevented them from leading a full life were the spiralling cost of living as contrasted with wages and government income support, access to health care, stigmatisation, lack of access to genuine employment pathways and limited chances to participate socially.

These issues and client recommendations will be considered when shaping the Brotherhood's 2012–14 strategic plan. This direct client feedback will contribute to the improvement of Brotherhood programs and services, and point to areas of further policy research and advocacy work, with the ultimate aim of improving the lives of low-income or disadvantaged people living in Australia.

About the project

This is a summary of a longer, unpublished report prepared by Sharon Bond and Michael Horn for an internal Brotherhood audience.

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