



31 July 2009

Mr Graeme Innes AM  
Disability Discrimination Commissioner and Race Discrimination Commissioner  
Australian Human Rights Commission  
GPO Box 5218  
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Mr Innes,

**RE: QPASTT Input to the 2009 African Australian: A report on human rights and social inclusion issues**

### **Background to QPASTT**

Since 1995, the Queensland Program of Assistance for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT) has provided a range of flexible and culturally sensitive services to people who have been tortured or who have suffered refugee related trauma prior to migration to Australia. Our service addresses the psychological, physical and social needs of individuals or families from a refugee background present with. In 2007-08, QPASTT provided services to over 2,035 clients from 49 different countries across Queensland. These services are designed to be flexible to meet the changing needs of clients and their communities free of charge. We have a range of service types and models to ensure appropriateness, accessibility and choice for our clients in supporting mental health and wellbeing.

QPASTT's Strategic Plan outlines the implementation of the organisation's vision through:

- (1) working with and alongside rather than for people and communities;
- (2) building and discovering peoples' strengths and resilience;
- (3) remaining culturally relevant;
- (4) forming partnerships between people, service providers and community;
- (5) respecting the importance of place in meeting with people;
- (6) responding to people's needs holistically and creatively;
- (7) nurturing and growing a gentle and caring environment;
- (8) valuing our organisation's credibility and responsive capacity in community health;
- (9) remaining relevant by employing people from the community; and
- (10) continually improving the quality of our organisation, our workers' competencies and our practice through reflection, learning and evaluation.

We believe that:

- recovery hinges on empowerment and is affected by social, economic and structural factors;
- empowerment is facilitated through a holistic response within a community development approach and with the maintenance of consultation with clients, their families and communities;
- restoration of control for clients is critical and is demonstrated through their right to choose what information to impart;
- choose how their information may be used;
- have their information held in strict confidence and determine, in so far as possible, in the process of healing and recovery.

### **QPASTT Services**

QPASTT offers the following support to individual clients and families from African refugee background. We offer these services across the State in particular from our offices in Yeronga Brisbane and Toowoomba as well as outreach sites in Logan, Gold Coast, Inala and Zillmere and Gatton.

- a. Counselling and support – torture and trauma as well as early intervention family relationship counselling and suicide prevention counselling focusing upon at risk young people.
- b. Advocacy
- c. Natural therapies
- d. Community capacity strengthening
- e. Professional training and development
- f. Youth Program including: Homework Club, Youth Space and School holiday Activities.

### **QPASTT Client Trends**

Since 2000, QPASTT has welcomed 2,084 clients from African refugee background which is 62% of our total clients for this period. These clients came from 19 different African countries. Up to one third of clients in the long term counselling program self referred to QPASTT for support around their mental health with presenting symptoms including: anxiety, depression, post traumatic stress, social isolation, traumatic grief, interpersonal difficulties, family dysfunction and a small number with severe mental illness who were then referred to tertiary mental health services and/or co-managed with QPASTT.

Since 2005 QPASTT has benefitted from a State Government funded community development position to work directly with African communities in Queensland. This role has strengthened QPASTT's relationships with these communities and assisted the organisation to remain focused upon current needs and issues.

QPASTT has developed a number of specific initiatives in response to community needs identified through our capacity building and client work. For instance, QPASTT developed a *Stronger Families Program* drawing together expertise from African refugee communities along with the sector to build parents skills, confidence and knowledge about raising children in Australia. We have also continued to develop the FASSTT's *Families in Cultural Transition Program* to meet the needs of local African communities in Brisbane, Logan, Toowoomba and Gatton. These

community based psycho-education programs have been sought out by communities and have been evaluated as highly successful by participants.

While we do not have rigorous statistical evidence, counsellors have identified a significant increase over the last 2 years in the level of family and inter-community violence, including sexual assault and an increase in young, teenage pregnancies among families in their first 1-3 years of arrival. This is NOT exclusive to refugees from Africa.

The agency has also experienced a much greater level of involvement with the Department of Child Safety as mental health and family relationship support is identified readily by schools and medical institutions under the Department of Child Safety SCAN program in Queensland.

### **Working with African Communities Example**

QPASTT has worked with the Queensland African Communities Council since its inception in 2007. Following the vilification of people of African, refugee background by the former Immigration Minister, QPASTT worked with members of the Sudanese community, at their request, to enhance their awareness of their rights, antidiscrimination processes and ways to influence public opinion about the valuable contribution to our society. We were pleased to be asked by the community to help and to be part of the process to address these issues. Incidents such as these have a significant impact on an individual and community's capacity to recover and heal from past state sanctioned discrimination and abuse.

### **Broader Issues**

The impact of torture and trauma on people is different for individuals. We have not recognised any significant difference between people from Africa or any other country in terms of the reasons and issues that people seek QPASTT's support.

Barriers to employment, secure housing, intergenerational conflict, domestic and family violence, the impact of torture and trauma and racism are shared key concerns for many people of refugee background. Perhaps of some significance is how racism arises for people from Africa, for example, in response to stark, physical differences in skin colour and height or the prevalence of young people hang around in groups.

Similarly, our experience of working with individuals and families around family violence and sexual assault is not unique to African refugee communities. Our experience is that these issues are more prevalent in families with low socio-economic factors – both prior to and after arrival in Australia. Also, for families who've experienced long term hardship e.g. many years, sometimes a generation or more in refugee camps.

### **Health Issues**

QPASTT believe a *State Refugee Health Strategy* would provide the impetus and support to address the following shortcomings in health services identified by QPASTT in Queensland. Many of these are common to all groups of refugees, not specifically people of African, refugee background.

- **Catch-up immunisation** for all adults and children, while currently funded by Queensland Health will not be funded for people from a refugee background past June 2010. Advocating for such resources has taken significant effort.
- **Interpreters** are not being utilised sufficiently by Hospitals or Community Health Services, including General Practices and there have been significant adverse health impacts as a result. Greater promotion and obligations to use interpreters are required.
- There is a **lack of bulk billing services** in the greater Brisbane region and therefore the task of linking clients to community GPs is difficult.
- There are **low levels of awareness** among health professions of health issues specific to refugee intake groups and this education is not provided within an integrated, medical focussed, education framework.
- Many families have complex health needs, particular large, single headed households. Improved access to integrated support to access health services beyond the orientation phase of settlement is essential.
- The Federal Government acknowledges that equitable access to dentistry services is important, however, many refugee families cannot access dental services and wait for many months in significant pain for access to public services.
- Settlement in rural and regional areas where families cannot access appropriate health services is high risk.
- There is a patchwork of client health information (or often no health information) that individuals bring on arrival or maintain through settlement that can impede effective and efficient health service delivery.

### **QPASTT Best Practice Examples**

QPASTT has developed or experienced a number of models of working with people from African, refugee background that we believe are highly successful.

#### **a) Youth Support Coordination Program, QLD Dept of Communities**

The model offered by this Program allows Youth Support Coordinators to work with young people in both school and community settings, including with family, other services and the community. Workers have flexibility to address the specific needs of a young people with resources to, for example, drive to see their parents/carers, advocate on their behalf with community representatives and services. This flexibility is possible as the workers sit outside the school system, managed by the funded organisation. The benefits of working within the school setting is that workers can build the school's capacity to respond to student needs through advice,

consultations, training as well as develop and implement programs. Work with families and communities contributes to the confidence of parents in contacting and engaging with the school around their children's needs.

At QPASTT this program focuses specifically on young people from refugee background, which is important as targeted cultural support, sensitive to the impacts of trauma and settlement (acculturative stress, intergenerational pressures) are needed.

**b) Promoting Our Unity, Culture & Human Rights [POUCH] Family Relationship Program**

The bicultural, therapeutic partnership in the POUCH Family Relationship Program has developed into a highly effective model of service delivery. This program comprises direct counselling services in people's homes focussed upon the impact of acculturation stress on family relationships as well as group work and community development initiatives. Bicultural workers of African, refugee background work alongside a counsellor specifically to offer cultural insight to assessment and intervention processes. Our experience is that through sufficient training and ongoing supervision offered to the team, the service outcomes in terms of: (a) the level of engagement by the clients in solving family problems; (b) individuals understanding of their new environment and the impact for all family members; and (c) individual confidence is successful. Through this Program, Community Leaders sought out QPASTT support to work with members of the community to prevent Department of Child Safety interventions. Together, we have developed the *Building Stronger Families Program*. This program offers:

- a) information necessary to understand the Australian parenting context;
- b) social and emotional support for parents in normalising their fears and stresses;
- c) assists parents to identify support structures that don't exist or are different here in Australia; and
- d) builds confidence in parents to gain control over their own family issues.

We have also assisted communities to advocate about their concerns relating to government intervention in their families to relevant Departments and Local Members.

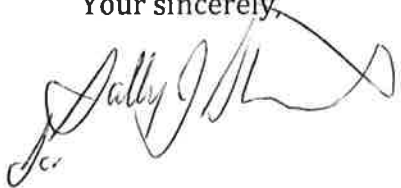
**Consultation Focus**

QPASTT shares the FASSTT agencies' concerns about the methodology adopted for seeking feedback on torture and trauma services. We welcome feedback and have processes, as well as research projects that assist us to respond to client and community needs. It is from our experience in evaluation and client feedback that we understand the barriers and difficulties in obtaining clear feedback about our service. The discussion paper, *African Australians: A report on human rights and social inclusion issues* invites readers to respond to the question "If you used a torture, trauma and rehabilitation service, did it help meet your needs?" (3.6). We are concerned how this question may be interpreted and then answered to provide sufficient meaning and context of value to this process and our service. QPASTT also queries why torture and trauma services have been singularly identified for

discussion as opposed to the myriad of other services involved in refugee health and/or settlement.

If you wish to follow up with QPASTT about any information or points raised in this submission, please don't hesitate to contact Sally Stewart (07) 33916677.

Your sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sally Stewart', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tracy Worrall  
Director

QPASTT  
P.O. Box 6254  
Fairfield QLD 4103  
Tel (07) 3120 1515  
sallystewart@qpastt.org.au