

Support provided for Unaccompanied Humanitarian Minors Refugee Services Alternative Care

Research Bulletin

This Research Bulletin is a summary of the 'Refugee Services Alternative Care Research Project' Report prepared for Families SA Refugee Services by Dr Keith Miller and Associate Professor Carol Irizarry, Discipline of Social Work and Social Planning, School of Social and Policy Studies, Flinders University, March 2011.

Families SA Refugee Service (RS) provides support for unaccompanied humanitarian minors (UHMs) in South Australia and recruitment, training, assessment and monitoring of carers in the delivery of UHM Alternative Care (UHMAC). The carers are mainly recruited from an ethnic background that is similar to the minors in their care. In 2008, staff members from RS formed the impression that their alternative care program with UHMs appeared to have overall positive outcomes. To examine the reasons why this might be the case more closely they invited Drs Keith Miller and Carol Irizarry to provide an external perspective on the service they were providing.

The study

The goals of the research project were to:

1. identify the successes and gaps of the current Alternative Care Service for UHMs and recommend strategies for bridging gaps identified
2. recommend strategies for maintaining and building on the successes of the Alternative Care Program and
3. achieve shared ownership of the process and results of the research project.

The researchers felt that the shared ownership of the project was achieved throughout the planning, development and implementation stages. This partnership was enabled by the establishment of a Steering Committee which included representative carers, RS staff, including Clinical Liaison Consultants, a representative from the Alternative Care Directorate, the Steering Committee Chair, Ms Andrea Tschoner, and the Manager of Refugee Services, Ms Alana Cole-Munro.

The Steering Committee provided direction at each stage of the project and was able to contribute essential advice in relation to gaining the involvement of carers and children. The researchers acknowledge and thank the members of this group.

Timeline:

The Steering Committee for Refugee Services Alternative Care first met in June 2008 during which Terms of Reference were developed.

Focus groups and interviews were undertaken in 2009 and early 2010. The initial intention had been to interview carers and then staff. The Steering Committee then considered the possibility of also interviewing some of the young people and children. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with a total of 22 carers, 15 staff, 17 Afghani young men and 11 children from a range of African countries. Interviews of carers of UHMs took place between February and April 2009. Interviews of RS Staff occurred between April and May 2009. Interviews with the children and young people occurred on two occasions: firstly at the *Fun Days Out* Summer Recreation program on 13th-15th January 2010 and again at a second recreational program on 22nd May 2010.

This project developed over the two year life of the program. The decision was made by the Steering Committee to hold all of the results from the focus groups and interviews until the final report. One of the consequences of this decision was that some of the recommendations had been recognized by RS and acted on prior to the release of this report.

Key findings

Identified Successes of the Service:

The Refugee Services Alternative Care Service was generally viewed positively by carers, staff and unaccompanied humanitarian minors. All three of these groups were given an opportunity to express their views through focus groups and individual interviews.

- Carers reported supportive relationships with staff, and also expressed a deep personal commitment to the UHMs in their care and a sustained interest in their well being.
- Carers often spoke of feeling that they were part of a community which felt a community responsibility to raise children from their own backgrounds and countries of origin.
- Carers strongly felt that it was critical to the UHMs in their care to be placed where possible with a carer of the same or similar ethnic and cultural background.
- Staff expressed the view that they appreciated the privilege of working in this section of Families SA, and also expressed a deep commitment to the needs and concerns of the refugee communities in South Australia. They saw the service as adaptable and able to meet the needs of UHMs in innovative ways.
- The children and young people who were interviewed reported good and supportive relationships with their carers and staff and generally reported appreciation of the benefit of living in Adelaide.

Gaps in the Service:

- Carers felt they needed more opportunities and assistance to express their views, concerns and opinions about their role in UHMAC.
- Carers felt that they needed more ongoing training to continue to do well in their role.
- Carers, staff, children and young people expressed the view that there was a lack of community based programs for children and young people which could assist with the task of integration.
- Carers expressed concern at the need to release young people from their care at 18 years of age.
- Many of the younger children reported experiencing racism at their school in the form of name calling and insulting remarks.
- The young people wanted a mechanism to participate more meaningfully in decisions which affected them.
- There was a distinct perception amongst the 14-18 year old Afghani young men that they did not find the educational program provided through Thebarton Senior College of value to them. They wanted an alternative program which would be more suitable to their practical needs of learning English and getting employment.

Recommendations

- That Refugee Services continue to recruit and engage carers from similar backgrounds to the children in their care.
- That carers be given the opportunity to give formal, independent feedback on services they receive from RS once a year.
- That the older children and young people be approached regularly to give their opinions and feed-back in relation to their lives and experiences in Adelaide and that this feed-back be incorporated in forward planning.
- That RS reassess the educational opportunities provided for older UHM.;
- That consideration be given to increasing the preparation and support of young people beyond providing accommodation as they leave care at 18 years of age.

- That efforts be directed towards helping the schools to prepare all students to be more supportive and receptive to refugee children who enter their classes in order to remove the bullying and teasing.
- That RS maintain, develop and expand community based programs for UHMs to help them integrate into Australian society.
- That consideration be given to the idea of RS offering therapeutic recreational programs over the school holidays for the younger children and that including non-refugee children be included in the program where possible.
- That Refugee Services continue to foster the community and cultural focus of their work which the UHMs, carers and staff all identify as having created a positive atmosphere.

Interviews

Interviews with Carers

This process for carers' focus groups was carefully planned with an awareness of the possible vulnerability of carers, many of whom had been refugees themselves at an earlier stage. Carers participated with enthusiasm and welcomed the opportunity to share their views.

It was felt by the researchers that some of the carers perceived the interviews as one legitimate avenue by which they could make their concerns known and that participants hoped the researchers would advocate for change on their behalf. This request was not overt but responses were sometimes carefully constructed and words carefully chosen to reflect strong options.

Interviews with Staff

Some staff volunteered to be part of a focus group and some of these also chose to participate in individual interviews. All members of staff were assured that their comments would only be used to contribute to the research and would not reflect on them individually. The fifteen staff members openly shared their views and perspectives. Many of their suggestions and ideas were incorporated into RS before the project was completed.

Interviews with Children and Young People

The Steering Committee recognized the value of interviewing the young people and children and felt that their voice would be very beneficial to the project. A great deal of deliberation occurred around the decision to include them in the project as a major concern was the possibility of creating an experience that might be stressful or upsetting, especially for the younger children. As a context for interviewing children and young people, two recreational programs called "Fun Days Out" were organized with Flinders University providing the structure and volunteers to run the program and Families SA Refugee Services providing

refreshments and the staff who were responsible for the duty of care for the participants. A grant from the university contributed to the cost of entertainments at the program.

The decision to present the research within a fun setting was purposeful as it was felt to be non-threatening and easier for the children and young people to give their consent freely and to feel relaxed about being interviewed. The research design for younger children was constructed through non-verbal material that included pictures and faces to depict the subjects under discussions and it was interacted in an informal play-like atmosphere.

The young people were asked to comment on four areas – their life in Adelaide, school/education, home and social connections - all subjects which focused on the present circumstances and not the past

Children and young people participated enthusiastically in the interviews and spent considerable time thinking about their answers and framing their responses. No one became upset during the process although there was always an awareness of this potential.

In the interviews with the young men, the researchers felt they were seen as the outsiders who could convey the concerns which were identified to the authorities or as the conduit through whom they could express certain issues. Interestingly, the young men colluded on some matters and at times they were even more guarded than the carers in what they shared. They expressed a fear that if they did not comply with the authorities' expectations, they could be deported or at least forego the opportunity to sponsor their families out to Australia and they were unwilling to take this risk. Words were deliberately chosen to convey their concerns in a way which they felt would not jeopardise their future opportunities.

One of the issues of concern to the carers and the young men currently in care was what would happen to them upon reaching 18 years of age and became independent. Ten years ago in Australia, Green and Jones observed that "young people leaving care are expected to become independent at a far earlier age than are young people who are fortunate enough to have supportive families" (1999, p. 64). The young people expressed concern that they would face loneliness, social isolation, and lack the skills to cope alone. This was one of a number of uncertainties the UHMs identified as they considered their futures.

The Research Context: UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

As a background to the project and to inform the researchers, a selective review of literature relevant to the project was undertaken. This included perspectives from Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. This literature provided some insights and depth into the commonality and differences of issues in other states and countries and other research that had been undertaken with refugee children in alternative care and a summary of this review is available from the authors. Mention here is made of an essential international commitment to guard the well-being of children.

The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is widely considered to be the most important international treaty concerning the human rights of children (Amnesty

International USA, 2003, p. 10). The four core principles of the Convention are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. The CRC provides that “in all actions concerning children...the best interest of the child shall be the primary consideration” (Byrne, 2008, p. 12). And so, “by agreeing to undertake the obligations of the Convention, national governments have committed themselves to protecting and ensuring children’s rights and they have agreed to hold themselves accountable for this commitment before the international community” (UNICEF, 2010, p. 2).

The Convention “is implemented in Australia by (all) nine governments...which each develop initiatives to implement the Convention that best meet the needs of their respective jurisdictions” (Attorney-General’s Department, 2009). Both the Commonwealth and South Australian Governments are under obligation to uphold the four principles of the Convention, including seeking “the best interests of the child”.

In terms of this research project the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provided the context to consider the questions of whether RS ensures the best interests of the child in terms of providing reasonable services, ensuring the material interests of the child are met in a family environment, and offering a supportive moral and intellectual environment for each child in care. Evidence from this study would largely confirm that it does.

RS are to be commended for their efforts in this regard. From the responses of UHMs and carers it appears that RS are providing a service which is very much appreciated. Families SA Refugee Services have sought to uphold the child’s sense of cultural identity by seeking to provide carers from similar ethnic backgrounds, and this is very much appreciated by the UHMs and the communities of which they are part.

References

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