

**NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma
Survivors (STARTTS) Response to the Call for Submissions on NSW
Department of Housing Reshaping Public Housing Reforms –
Targeting and Tenure
Access Allocation and Tenure Framework – Policy Proposal**

STARTTS is a statewide service catering for the growing needs of traumatized refugees, particularly those who have been tortured as part of their ordeal. STARTTS provides a range of psychological and psychosocial interventions to people from refugee and refugee-like situations within individual, family and community contexts. It also promotes capacity building among service providers working with this client group through its training program. STARTTS programs operate on a number of levels of the social system including individual, family, refugee community, and mainstream society and service providers. STARTTS programs are of a holistic nature and include counselling and psychotherapy, youth program, *Families in Cultural Transition* (FICT) program and a variety of community development initiatives. STARTTS receives funding from a number of sources including the NSW Department of Health, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

Since its inception STARTTS remained involved and interested in housing issues in recognition of the importance of stable and secure accommodation for our clients' recovery processes. This interest was demonstrated through numerous training sessions provided to the staff of the NSW Department of Housing, participation in housing-related networks and consultation processes, client advocacy as well as involvement with supporting our clients' tenancies.

The Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy ACL Consortium

This paper will draw on STARTTS experience as well as the experience and expertise of ACL as the lead agency of the IHSS Consortium covering the Sydney Metro Region. Below is information about IHSS and the Consortium as drafted by ACL.

The Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) is a Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) funded program designed to help Humanitarian Entrants rebuild their lives in Australia by providing them with support designed to meet their initial settlement needs.

The aim of the IHSS is to help Humanitarian Entrants achieve self-sufficiency as soon as possible in the settlement process and to distribute resources on a needs basis. Emphasis is placed on sensitivity to cultural differences and minimum intrusion into Entrants' lives. A case-management approach is provided to ensure that the special needs of humanitarian entrants are identified and addressed promptly by matching them with settlement services that meet their particular circumstances.

IHSS helps Entrants gain access to mainstream services such as Centrelink, Medicare, banks, general and specialist health and medical services, education, training and employment as well as links to the community.

Upon exiting the IHSS, Entrants are referred to general settlement services provided through Migrant Resource Centres, Migrant Service agencies and organisations funded under the Community Settlement Services Scheme.

ACL IHSS Consortium

Since October 1, 2005 the ACL IHSS Consortium has been delivering the DIMA funded program in the Northern and Southern Metropolitan Regions of Sydney as well as in Wollongong and Newcastle. The ACL IHSS Consortium is a partnership between ACL, Resolve FM, STARTTS and Mission Australia. The Consortium is committed to providing service delivery that is consistent with IHSS Principles. Each Consortium plays a vital role in the settlement process. These roles are described briefly below.

ACL

Provides case coordination, information and referrals. This includes a case coordination plan based on an initial needs assessment, information about and referral to mainstream agencies, on-arrival reception and assistance. ACL case workers meet entrants on arrival at the airport, take them to suitable accommodation and provide them with initial orientation to the community as well as meeting any emergency needs for medical attention or clothing and footwear. ACL assists Proposers in fulfilling their role of assisting Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) entrants.

Resolve FM

Resolve FM provides initial accommodation to entrants and helps them to find appropriate and affordable long-term accommodation. A household goods assistance scheme is available to help entrants in establishing their own household in Australia.

STARTTS

Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) helps in overcoming physical and psychological health problems and raises awareness amongst health care providers and encourages them to be sensitive to the needs of humanitarian entrants. STARTTS assesses needs, puts together a case plan and provides short term torture and trauma counselling services and referral as necessary.

Mission Australia

Mission Australia (MA) coordinates volunteers and provides volunteer support to refugees to assist them further in making links with the community, gaining independence and becoming self-reliant.

Target clients are:

- subclass 200 visa holders (Refugee) - entitled to full IHSS support including, on arrival reception and assistance, case coordination, accommodation services, Household Goods Assistance, STARTTS counselling

- subclass 202 visa holders (Special Humanitarian Program Entrants) - entitled to case-coordination, assessment of Proposers and provision of support, Household Goods assistance, STARTTS counselling
- subclass 204 visa holders (Woman at risk) - entitled to full IHSS support including, on arrival reception and assistance, case coordination, accommodation services, Household Goods Assistance, STARTTS counselling
- PPV and TPV visa holders - entitled to STARTTS counselling on entering the community

Actual level of support is determined upon individual assessment by IHSS Case Coordinators. This means that certain Entrants will actually require less support (e.g. because of ties to local community), others under the same visa may require more (e.g. women at risk). The average time an Entrant receives assistance would be 3-4 months but some may require up to 12 months intensive assistance. Length of assistance is determined on a case-by-case basis.

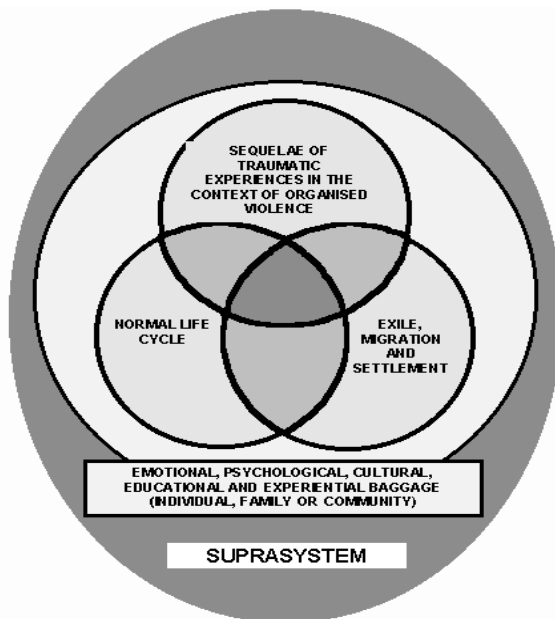
Structure of the paper

This paper will follow the structure outlined in the Reshaping Public Housing – Access Allocation and Tenure Framework Consultation Report, through provision of additional comments the key issues relevant to STARTTS client group.

STARTTS Clients

STARTTS Clients are individuals, families and communities from refugee and refugee-like situations, now living in NSW, who have survived torture and other traumatic experiences in the context of organised violence.

There is a complex interaction between the problems associated with the aftermath of traumatic experiences in the context of organised violence, the problems related to the exile, migration and resettlement processes, and the trials and difficulties that are part and parcel of the normal life cycle. One way to conceptualise the complex nature of the problems faced by refugees in exile in countries such as Australia, is as the complex interface between these factors, and their interaction with the attributes of the individual, including his/her emotional, psychological, cultural, educational and experiential baggage, as illustrated in the diagram below (figure1). This interface is also relevant to define these factors at other levels of the system, such as the family unit or the refugee community.



This complex interaction is directly relevant to the definition and assessment of complex housing needs which stand at the heart of the new Access, Allocation and Tenure Framework. An example of the above interaction in the context of housing issues is provided below:

Case Study 1:

Ms. Ajang and her six children have arrived to Australia 2 months ago under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP, 202) Visa. They are currently living with their proposer in a three bedroom unit in Western Sydney. The proposer is a new arrival himself and his family consists of 7 people including 5 children under the age of 12. The proposer is experiencing difficulties locating suitable accommodation for Ms. Ajang and her children.

Ms. Ajang and her children have spent a prolonged period in a refugee camp in Kenya. Prior to that, Ms. Ajang and some of the children have survived significant trauma in Sudan. Ms. Ajang's husband was kidnapped and presumed missing. Ms. Ajang's proposer has survived similar experiences. Both Ms. Ajang and her proposer are experiencing high levels of irritability and some of the children are reacting with aggressive behaviours. Most of those behaviours belong to the usual array of post-trauma reactions. In this case, family conflict is being impacted upon by overcrowding and other settlement related matters. These difficulties are impacting on Ms. Ajang's ability to learn English, find her way around Australian systems and participate in her new community.

Concerns specific to the proposed “opportunities to strengthen new arrangements”

1. Fair and equitable access

- STARTTS is concerned about the process of automated assessment. A large proportion of the STARTTS client group experience difficulties with English language and understanding of Australian systems and processes. These barriers impact on their ability to fill in various forms and are likely to impact on their ability to indicate the nature of their complex housing need if applying without support. This can be addressed through the Department’s recognition of the complex housing need indicators suggested by STARTTS (see below).
- It is likely that Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants may require significant support with the Housing Application process. While Refugee arrivals are linked in with formal support systems, Special Humanitarian Program Entrants (Visa class 202) rely on their proposers to assist them with accessing various services. Commonly, the proposers are recent arrivals themselves and are experiencing difficulties accessing services. STARTTS is concerned that the new policy framework has a potential to disadvantage those who arrived under the 202 Visa Class.
- STARTTS is interested in being involved in development of the Screening tool for complex housing needs as well as assessment tools and protocols for joint assessment as outlined in the Human Services Accord.
- ACL is interested in being involved in both of the above processes
- At this point, some possible indicators of Complex Housing need to be included in the automated assessment that may ensure that refugees and humanitarian entrants are not disadvantaged in this process may include:
 - Torture and Trauma
 - Dual diagnosis – eg. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Depression
 - Women headed households
 - People with poor living skills
 - People with complex physical health issues resulting from the experience of torture and trauma
 - Refugee families with disabled child
 - Refugee families with aged parents
 - Protracted history of unstable accommodation – overseas and in Australia

Clearly, some of the above indicators may need to be further explored within the face-to-face assessment. Taking that into account, the simplified indicators for the purposes of the automated assessment may include:

- Visa class – Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants, Permanent Protection Visa
- Survivor of torture and trauma

- STARTTS wishes to express an interest in provision of training for staff who will be involved in face-to-face assessments. The training that can be provided includes:
 - Interviewing torture and trauma survivors
 - Assessment of the impact of unmet housing need on physical and mental health of torture and trauma survivors
 - Self-care for staff working with survivors of torture and trauma

Additionally, STARTTS could provide train-the-trainer sessions for relevant Department staff and/or management ensuring maintenance of the capacity to work with this client group. The case study below illustrates the impact of face-to-face interviews on survivors of torture and trauma and highlights the need for highly trained staff:

Case Study 2 (provided by ACL):

Igatu is from Sierra Leone. She is a single mother with one child. She suffered severe domestic violence in her own country and lived at temporary accommodation. She arrived in Australia in 2004. She applied for Priority Housing and was interviewed. The interview was very hard for her as she needed to repeat her story in order to prove her eligibility. During the interview she felt interrogated and thought that the Department Officer did not think that she was “deserving enough”. She felt she did not argue her case well enough. Following the interview she started to feel depressed and subsequently had to commence on anti-depressant medication. While the interview did not cause depression, Igatu felt that it certainly made her feel worse. She was rejected and as she felt very vulnerable she decided not to pursue the Appeals process.

- STARTTS and ACL are also prepared to participate in assessments through provision of documentation relevant to identification on complex housing needs. It would be essential that both organisations are involved in development of the structure and processes associated with documentation provision.

2. Responsiveness to the complex housing needs of CALD clients

- As illustrated by the Case Study 1, overcrowding and hidden homelessness are common experiences for refugee families particularly those who arrived on the 202 Visa Class.
- STARTTS approach to the complexity of needs and issues experienced by torture and trauma survivors is described above. It is essential that the needs of this client group are considered in light of this complexity as well beyond the issues experienced by a very generic category of CALD clients.
- It is common for newly arrived refugee families to be too large to be catered for through the existing housing stock available on Private Rental Market. It is also an experience of our clients that having more children has a negative impact on

Real Estate Agents' and landlords' willingness to take them on as tenants. It is essential that the Department considers this factor in defining Complex Housing need.

- Many refugee communities tend to settle in particular locations. Community support is essential to the processes of settlement and recovery of torture and trauma survivors. While locational needs assessment seems to take into account formal supports provided by health practitioners, it does not seem to give sufficient weight to community and family (“informal”) support structures.
- Most new arrivals have limited general life skills that equip them to handle Australian systems and processes including the concept of renting and negotiating private rental market. Many have difficulties with even more basic skills including use of phones, key-cards, household appliances, budgeting and public transport. Lack of these skills should be a significant factor in determining Complex Housing Need.

3. Streamlining assessment and review processes

- STARTTS supports the importance of avoiding duplication and clients having to re-tell their stories. As illustrated in the Case Study 2, re-telling the story particularly in an environment where a survivors feels powerless, is likely to be re-traumatising and may act as a trigger for further psychological health problems.
- While the interview process may lead to re-traumatisation, it is also an essential component of the Complex Housing Need assessment. In STARTTS experience, the Department staff were better able to understand client issues when having a face-to-face contact with the client.
- While, STARTTS and ACL are willing to participate in the joint assessment process, implications of this process for our resources should be acknowledged.

4. Managing confusion and anxiety among applicants and tenants

- It is likely that confusion and anxiety will be present possibly for a prolonged period of time. While there may be strategies to reduce those it is not likely that they will be fully eliminated.
- There are additional factors at play for torture and trauma survivors. Research indicates that safety and security are essential elements of the successful recovery from trauma. Consequently, any changes related to fulfilment of an essential need such as housing are likely to impact on this client group. Furthermore, most new arrivals have very little knowledge and understanding of Australian systems which for most refugee communities is made more complex due to the lack of trust in government structures resulting from exposure to state-sponsored violence in the country of origin.
- It is essential that any changes are communicated to refugee communities through a number of avenues including: information sessions (ACL may be a good venue for this as most new arrivals attend AMEP), community radio announcements

(talk-back is a particularly popular format) and information provision to health and welfare workers from those communities.

- Further to this, it is crucial to include ACL as well as AMES (the other AMEP provider) in any communication strategies for new arrivals and work with them on the most appropriate methods to provide this information.

5. Sustaining tenancies

- Successful tenancy is based on the premise of adequate support. For Department of Housing staff to provide this support and engage with other agencies working with refugees, there should be strategies put in place to ensure that staff are trained and supported in this role. Of a particular significance is the issue of staff support in the area of **Vicarious Traumatism** and **Burnout**. STARTTS staff involved in training provision to the Department staff have taken notice of this need and have recommended a structured approach to the Department staff debriefing and support in addition to training in self-care. STARTTS has a well developed training package to address this need and would be willing to provide training within the context of Accord.
- The Department needs to acknowledge that for IHSS clients who are housed while still ACL clients, the support agency may change after exiting IHSS.

6. Incentives for tenants to improve their circumstances

- These are closely linked with exit products and processes. It was suggested by a number of more established refugee communities that a pathway to home ownership through being able to purchase the property they were housed in coupled with home purchasing advice service, may be the most suitable exit product.

7. Exit products

- In addition to innovative models such as brokerage, facilitation of home ownership through access to home purchasing advice may be one of the more effective exit products.
- Exit products should be linked to regular and stable employment.

8. Monitoring and evaluation

STARTTS and ACL both agree that a formal consultation mechanism that is representative of key non-housing specific agencies should be put in place to monitor the impact of the Policy Framework on refugee individuals, families and communities.

Additionally, there is a need to monitor access issues and evaluate those in terms of access for particular groups. This makes it essential to continue to improve the Department's documentation practices particularly in the area of language, country of birth and visa class.