



Finding a Home in Regional NSW

Many refugees have settled away from the main cities in small country towns. ANNELIESE TODARELLO writes about STARTTS' work in these communities.

“Where do you call home?” seems like a simple question to the vast majority of Australians. When we think of home, it is often the

simple, and familiar experiences that connect us to a particular place; ever-present, but not always consciously registered.

For many refugees however this connection is severed, and the challenge of settlement is to rebuild those links that were lost. This challenge is daunting for all refugees, but for those settling in rural and regional areas, without an established community to call on, the task is even more formidable.

Over the past decade, resettlement of refugees in regional areas has increased dramatically, but the infrastructure has often lagged behind the needs. Many community service workers, particularly those working in mental health, have had to grapple with the presentation of a range of concerns around the experiences of complex trauma and the adaptation to life in a foreign land. Health services in these regional communities had to quickly diversify to meet the needs that they

were facing.

With survivors of refugee trauma now located across NSW, STARTTS began the process of providing services in regional centres. Initially it branched out to Wollongong in 1992 and Newcastle in 1997.

It soon became apparent that further expansion was needed and the move to Coffs Harbour came in 2004 and Wagga Wagga in 2008, reflecting the growing spread of refugees across the state and the need to provide services to them.

However, branching out into regional areas was not easy. In Sydney, STARTTS had garnered the trust and respect of several generations of refugee communities and could rely on this good reputation being passed on to new clients.

While previous fly-in staff had laid down some ground work in regional communities with small numbers of clients, this was not enough to gain the trust of entire communities from the outset. The first and main challenge for fledgling regional offices was to foster at a grassroots level confidence in STARTTS, their services, and above all their staff.

Work started from the bottom up; often STARTTS

staff would introduce themselves to newly resettled refugees, knowing full well that many practical and physical health related concerns had to be ticked off the to-do list before people could take heed of how they were coping as an individual, as part of a family, and as part of a community.

However, it was these initial introductions that set the tone for future relationships with communities, and it was often not the programs or services offered, but the fundamental feelings of respect and being heard that brought people back to STARTTS.

The process of building trust has been gradual, but it is happening. STARTTS Rural and Regional team leader, spoke of the gratifying and humbling experience of having one of her clients, a Tamil lady from Sri Lanka, slowly overcome her own traumas and anxieties through the process of counselling.

Then one day she came back to STARTTS, but she was not alone; she had brought her friend with her, knowing that the team leader would be able to help her in the same way, and understanding that at STARTTS her friend was safe. This is an experience that has been replicated with a young Afghani woman who described STARTTS as “a place where I express my concerns” to a friend of hers and this friend came in looking for the same safe place. Trust, it seems, is built one person at a time.

Simultaneously, at STARTTS there has been a continued emphasis on community development. STARTTS has long recognised that the individual and the community’s health are inextricably linked, and this is particularly so in regional areas.

From practical computer groups with Afghan youth to adventure-based youth camps, Denise Tunks, of STARTTS Coffs Harbor, is always astounded at the success of community activities. For example, in collaboration with the local refugee community and TAFE, an adult swimming program was started. STARTTS

not only facilitates the lessons and transport, Denise and her colleagues are also known to jump into the pool with the women’s group.

The first women’s swimming group comprised of Ethiopian, Eritrean, Congolese and Burundi women, who could barely speak to one another, but they were cracking up watching each other’s first steps into the water, all of them flopping about trying to gain some centre of balance.

This laughter and chatter, in the guise of learning to swim, forges social bonds that are fused around the positive experience of making connections with other people in a safe and relaxed environment.

The crux of all of these projects and the basis of their success is that the initial impetus comes from the community itself. STARTTS is simply one player in a highly collaborative process.

Building on existing resources and services specific to refugee communities has been integral to the work of STARTTS across NSW. ‘The STARTTS regional teams consist of several ‘go-to-everything-for’ workers’. If it wasn’t for the existing services and community support it would be impossible for STARTTS to build the capacity of the clients and their extended communities.

The existing strengths of the communities they work with, as well as the long-standing work by many other organisations in regional areas, have been vital to STARTTS’ progress.

The work forging relationships, at both an individual and community level, is paying off for the STARTTS Rural and Regional

staff. The best evidence of this comes from the many stories of STARTTS regional staff being invited to every wedding, community celebration and other event that’s happening.

Staff talk of being invited into people’s homes as a form of gratitude and being almost bombarded with small tokens of appreciation; chocolates, food and kilos of blueberries from refugees who are employed in the farms surrounding Coffs Harbour Bay.

No longer are refugees simply adapting to their new environment, they are interacting with the existing communities and shaping the cultural landscape. These growing connections have implications beyond culture, they also represent a sense of security and community healing - in a sense, it is the beginning of calling a place your home.



Young clients and staff at a STARTTS camp in Newcastle. Photo courtesy of STARTTS

Similarly, a couple who came to Australia with a young family who were involved with STARTTS during a short but intense crisis continually drop in with gifts of food. On Christmas day they arrived bearing an entire fish specially cooked in a traditional method. The stories of gratitude are never ending.

Undetected by them, the STARTTS regional staff think they are simply helping people adapt to Australia, all the while they themselves have been integrated into communities that are adopting them as their own.

Settling in regional areas creates its own particular challenges, not least of which is the sense of dislocation from pre-existing cultural hubs for new refugees, while counsellors in regional areas were often less able to draw on existing cultural support networks for their clients.

However with time this is changing - the beginnings of cultural-hubs are starting to take root in regional NSW, and they are a testament to the resourcefulness

of refugee communities and their ability to transform a place to reflect the familiar and the celebrated.

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And just as refugee communities are calling rural and regional Australia home, so too is STARTTS. Just like their refugee clients, STARTTS has also had to overcome significant challenges settling in a rural area - building trust, limited resources and the unique challenges of working with clients in regional Australia. But the hard work has paid off - as STARTTS has helped many people to become part of the rich tapestry of regional Australia, it has in the process become an important part of that picture. R