



*Working to
improve refugee
resettlement in
Australia*

***PETER SHERGOLD** is the Coordinator-General for Refugee Resettlement in New South Wales. He has been involved in a number of initiatives to assist newly arrived refugees get jobs. **SHAUN NEMORIN** is team leader of STARTTS' School Liaison Program. This is an edited transcript of an interview on ABC Radio National about refugee resettlement.*

What are the major difficulties and barriers that refugees face once they have been accepted into Australia, as far as being able to settle down and get on with making a new life?

PS: Almost every refugee who arrives here comes fleeing personal tragedy and wants to build a new life. Refugees want to be self-reliant. They haven't selected Australia because they think it provides a safety net of welfare support; they come here to build a new life. So it's obvious to me we have to provide good settlement services, and we do that pretty well – health, education, justice services and community support – but it seemed to me there were two major problems we needed to address: one was bureaucratic, the other was a gap in settlement services.

Generally.

Yes, while the New South Wales [NSW] government agencies worked with Commonwealth agencies, it was good but it was not sufficient. Now, community organisations that work with refugees have become collaborators and are part of the partnership, looking at how settlement services can be improved. When I talked to refugees I was overwhelmed by how appreciative they were of government support, but the question raised at every meeting was about jobs. They said, "We appreciate getting our children into school, accessing English classes, but how can I get a job?" Most refugees see that as the marker. If they can get employment, they become self-reliant. So when we looked at NSW, of course we wanted to improve the education services, the support for torture and trauma survivors and so on, but a lot of our effort has gone into helping people find their way into a career path and build new employment opportunities. That's the additional part we have focused on in NSW.

We'll talk about employment opportunities soon, but let's also hear about another program, a school liaison

service that's run by the Service for the Treatment & Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, (STARTTS). The team leader is Shaun Nemorin. Shaun, tell us how this schools program works. Is it in primary schools, high schools?

SN: It's in both. STARTTS is a specialist service that provides clinical, psychosocial and community development interventions for individuals, families and communities to help them heal from their experiences of war and persecution. The program I manage – the School Liaison Program – works alongside a group of child and adolescent counsellors who also work at STARTTS in specialist youth teams. My team works in partnership with the Department of Education, Catholic schools and non-government schools, and through these we have been able to work in about 150 schools across the state. Last year we had referrals from 1,000 students for psychotherapy and also for therapeutic and youth interventions, that were culturally appropriate.

Shaun, you must have met very many young people who've suffered trauma. What sort of things do they now mostly struggle with as a consequence of that?

It tends to vary. It should first be acknowledged that not every student who comes to Australia as a refugee will require counselling. Often it is the positive relationships they build in Australia and the care by teachers that provide one of the biggest healing tools and, as Bruce Perry said "what traumatised children and their families most need is a healthy community to buffer the pain, the stress and loss caused by their earlier trauma". What works is any intervention that increases the number and quality of their relationships, so that translates into welcoming refugees. When communities, environments and schools provide that welcome, there is often no need to refer kids for counselling. However, some might need some extra support.



So give me an example. Trauma can manifest in various ways, it can manifest, for example, in aggressive behaviour or anger. How do you deal with that?

I can give you an example of a lad who I used to work with who may have been described as an angry boy. I mean, sometimes you can't blame some of these kids because of the experiences they had to endure. We grew up in a wonderful country and we are taught the good guys win, we are taught the value of justice. But what happens when you come from a place where the good guys lose? That's the reason some of them come to Australia in the first place.

At STARTTS we try to come up with interventions that resonate with young people. Some of my colleagues came up with a program called Sporting Linx. They were able to conceptualise a program based on football. Young refugees have played football in their home countries or in refugee camps. So my colleagues and I were able to conceptualise an intervention incorporating psychosocial tools, such as mindfulness and cognitive behavioural approaches around goal-setting. Importantly, it was a program that helped people use a sporting field as a metaphor for how to go about their lives in a new land and also how to unpack their experiences pre-arrival, so that involved playing within a set of rules and together. We also did this alongside the Western Sydney Wanderers football club.

I helped the young man I mentioned earlier. Within the confines of the sporting field I was able to help with exercises to promote emotional regulation, and to control anger we did breathing exercises and psychoeducation. We discussed why he was experiencing outbursts of anger. He was able to take these lessons into the classroom and the playground and he improved significantly. He is a natural leader and soon he was nominated for the student representative council at school. In fact, this year he is studying Criminology at

university and he hopes to be a police officer.

Peter Shergold, would you say this sort of school liaison service is an example of what you talked about? The teamwork between a couple of different government departments and an NGO is I think what I'm getting from you?

PS: I think it is. STARTTS is a wonderful organisation. The Department of Education of course has services to help migrant children, and particularly refugee children, get a start. The key is to have the two organisations working together and that is what Shaun's talking about. But I think what Shaun is also saying is you don't just do this by treating the children or the person looking for work as a case to be managed, a beneficiary or a recipient. The way STARTTS and Shaun deal with children is a little bit the way I and the Refugee Employment Support Program deal with adults: it's about giving refugees the support to be able to take control of their own lives. Refugees are people who have been forced to flee, but if you think about it, they're risk-takers – they tend to be entrepreneurial, which is why refugees are the most likely Australians to start up their own business.

To start a small business.

Definitely. As Chancellor of Western Sydney University, it is astonishing that we have more than 400 students who came to Australia on special humanitarian visas. So if you open up that opportunity in the way that Shaun is talking about, people will grab that opportunity.

Shaun, how do ongoing war or other atrocities in their country of origin continue to affect those young people?

SN: It definitely does. Overseas wars are a part of the reality of refugees in Australia. Through Facebook, phone and Skype we constantly get news that deeply

impacts kids here. In relation to the current Rohingya crisis, six months ago I received a phone call from a school principal. This is the way the School Liaison Program works, where we are invited by schools to make presentations about the specific needs of its students. Rohingya kids did not want to come to school because they were traumatised by what was happening in their homeland. They had been here for some years, but they were affected by those events. In another life I worked for UNHCR and I was based in Cox's Bazar working with the Rohingya there and also in [Myanmar's] northern Rakhine state. So I organised how we would work with some of those kids. We decided to use some narrative therapy approaches, but I was also able to speak with the teachers and advise them on how to better work with the kids and understand them better.

What's a narrative therapy approach?

SN: It is about trying to change their story. Instead of looking at themselves as victims, it is about looking at themselves as survivors and getting them to look at their history as a way that empowers them and to feel proud of their experiences, and also for them to realise they can contribute to Australia as well. It was a successful approach. From the feedback I received from the schools the kids wanted to continue studying, but the biggest trauma was triggered by their parents who were transfixed by the videos in Facebook and on the news, the scenes of people fleeing across the Naf River into Bangladesh. And how can you blame them? The kids were so traumatised by having their parents show them these videos – often well-meaning – but it affected them. It sort of feeds into a whole-of-school narrative in that it's not just about the healing of students and children, but also the healing lies within their parents as well. Regardless of all the work we might be able to do within the school setting, if the students go home every day to traumatised parents it will obviously impact them significantly.

PS: One of the things I discovered in my time working with Shaun and others is how complex post-traumatic stress is, because sometimes you talk to children or adults and you can tell that they are suffering and need support. Other times you talk to them and they seem perfectly fine and, in fact, may continue to

be fine almost for the rest of their lives. But what I have discovered, both with children and adults, is that if something happens years after they have arrived it will bring back that flood of memories. It's at that stage we have to intervene. I know, for example, people who are employed are much less likely to become depressed once they are here. But I also have to accept the fact that there will be times during their work careers where we are going to have to go back and deal with the issues that still hold them back.

On that employment front, many of us have had the experience of, say, you get into a cab and the taxi driver tells you that he was an engineer in Afghanistan or you meet a cleaner who used to be a university lecturer in Syria ... Apart from language, what other barriers do newly-arrived refugees face in getting work that matches their skills here?

PS: And matches their ambitions! Obviously, language is a part of it. Large numbers of the additional refugees we have taken from Syria and Iraq have low-level English skills. But let me say, many come from countries with high-quality education before civil wars broke out. Many of them, in fact the majority I speak to, already speak two and sometimes three languages, so their ability to learn English is significantly higher. Many of them are skilled workers and one of the difficulties is getting their overseas qualifications or experience recognised. Partly it's getting that first opportunity. If you go for a job interview,

employers will say, "Well, where is your reference from your last job?" or "Where is the reference from your school?"

One key aim is to find positions for refugees in the NSW public sector. We found 300 people employment through the Refugee Employment Support Program, which is giving that first opportunity to refugees, because once you are in the workplace you start to learn much faster than you do just being in your community. More than that, three, six or nine months down the track you will have a reference and you will be on your way. One of the things I have discovered is that if you give refugees employment opportunities, they will almost always hold onto that job until something better comes along or until they get an opportunity to go to TAFE or go to university. **R**

When communities, environments and schools provide that welcome, there is often no need to refer kids for counselling.