

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Jasmina Bajraktarevic reports on STARTTS consultations with refugee communities across New South Wales.

State terrorism and organised violence target the very essence of a community: relationships between individuals, families and other groups. When relationships are affected, communities fragment and a lack of trust pervades all social interactions. The situation is exacerbated in communities that are already fraught with political, ethnic and religious complexities and divisions.

Since it is impossible to leave behind the impact of trauma on individuals and families, it is equally impossible to discard the effects on communities. In Australia, refugee communities may be fragmented, suspicious of government-related services and contain a lot of internal conflict and little structure. It is enormously challenging for a government service such as STARTTS to consult with these communities and it often feels as if one is walking on a political minefield.

Countries with oppressive regimes are not known for their encouragement of community participation. Therefore the whole concept of community consultation might be foreign and frightening for some refugee communities. After living in fear of the consequences of one's own thoughts and opinions, one can find it difficult

to freely express that opinion even in a new country like Australia.

In 1988 STARTTS was formed on the wave of refugee community consultations that indicated a need for a service to work with survivors of torture and trauma. Since its inception, STARTTS has consulted with refugee communities to obtain their input in the service's planning and implementation. We see community participation as a principle value of our service as well as a tool for building or strengthening communities.

Community consultations are an ongoing process rather than series of isolated events. Consequently, STARTTS utilises a number of formal and informal community consultation and participation strategies. Formal community consultation is one of these strategies. This involves organising a gathering of all key community leaders, clients and other interested individuals. For example, a recent consultation with the Tamil community involved months of preparation where the meeting was publicised as widely as possible to ensure that all stakeholders made an appearance.

When the consultation takes place, STARTTS' staff present an overview of the service and facilitate

discussions with the community regarding their experiences of trauma, their needs and how STARTTS can best assist them. Finally, a plan of action is decided upon which will eventually be implemented by STARTTS and/or other relevant stakeholders.

STARTTS' work consists of a balance between community development activities and clinical approaches. These two facets of our work are seen as spots on the continuum rather than opposing philosophical positions. Most of the community development work is done by STARTTS bi-cultural counsellors who are from the same cultural backgrounds as the refugee communities they work with. They have an in-depth, personal as well as professional experience of these communities. Generalist counsellors, who are not from refugee backgrounds, endeavor to learn about and work other communities.

As they go about their daily work, STARTTS counsellors are constantly exposed to the community's views about STARTTS' services and the communities' needs. Counsellors participate in community networks, events and functions, organise groups and other projects, and assist the communities to develop structures. All these contacts contribute to ▶



communities' input in STARTTS' services.

STARTTS conducts a series of formal community consultations, as described above, on a yearly basis. Formal consultations are used when the community is ready for them as a format of interaction. For smaller, emerging communities, a significant amount of preparatory work and informal consultations has to be undertaken prior to embarking on a formal consultations program.

Over the years we have formally consulted with Lao, Khmer, Arabic speaking, Spanish speaking, Vietnamese, Bosnian, East Timorese, Dari/Farsi speaking, Kurdish, Tamil, Assyrian and African communities. The process has been as rewarding as it has been challenging. The challenges have origins in the effects trauma has on communities while the rewards are easily located in the trust we have developed with the communities and knowing that what we are doing is relevant and appropriate.

Often individuals and communities feel highly ambivalent about being in Australia as they were forced to leave their homes and hopes of return loom large for many years. A friend of mine described it as living two lives — one is in Australia but the other one is in the country of origin. Consequently, many refugee communities organise themselves around the issues relevant to their home country while having little interest in settlement and services perceived to be assisting with it.

However, patience, flexibility and persistence usually produce results and STARTTS exchanges meaningful dialogue with refugee communities. There are issues communities have raised in the past that are common to all communities such as the need for education about the work of STARTTS, the effects of trauma and the concept of counselling. Refugee communities also want STARTTS' staff to increase their knowledge of the specific experiences and circumstances that particular communities have encountered.

Very often settlement related issues are raised including access to public housing, immigration services, education and employment, and need for training of mainstream service providers working with refugees. Some communities have spoken about their experiences of racism and marginalisation in Australia, while others have been more focused on the events in their home country.

This year, STARTTS has already held Tamil community consultations and preparations are underway for Spanish speaking, Arabic speaking, Afghan and Lao consultations. In addition, STARTTS will be supporting the Serbian community in organising a forum focusing on the needs and issues of Serbian refugees. The forum will also offer an opportunity for community feedback on STARTTS and related needs. This year's consultations are significant in that they are conducted in partnership with NSW Refugee Health Service, thus bringing the two services closer together.

Further strengthening of connections with Refugee Health Service (RHS) as well as an opportunity to widen our consultations was offered through the consultations organised by RHS. We have participated in Burmese and Serbian consultations as well as consultations with health workers in the Western Sydney Area Health Service. Joint consultations with RHS also ensure the services are not duplicated and communities are not "over-consulted".

At the moment, we are exploring a feasibility of conducting a client review of STARTTS services through the use of focus groups, and establishment of a client advisory group. The challenge here lies in making this structure a vehicle for increased participation and communication extending the existing trust and mutual respect that characterizes the relationship between STARTTS staff and our clients. Tokenism, often a feature of such structures, must be avoided at all costs. Awareness of this pitfall and a commitment to avoiding falling into it will assist in building a structure which

will enable STARTTS to learn from the ones who have the most intimate knowledge about the transformation from a victim into a survivor. ■

Jasmina Bajraktarevic is the Community Services Coordinator at STARTTS.

Building Communities

By Jasmina Bajraktarevic

When pain rules and mistrust
blossoms
The links are broken,
fragments of our lives and
networks floating around
erupting in flames each time
they touch.

It is time to heal the severed
connections
Rebuild what was broken
Infuse the networks with hope
and strength
Banish mistrust through sharing
our trustworthiness.

The space between is as
important as the space within
And that is our building-site.
The place of new beginnings!