

**INQUIRY INTO CURRENT AND FUTURE PROVISION OF
HEALTH SERVICES IN THE SOUTH-WEST SYDNEY
GROWTH REGION**

Organisation: NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and
Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)

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Submission to the NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No 2 – Health, Inquiry into the current and future provision of health services in the South-West Sydney Growth Region

Introduction

The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture & Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) is a non-profit organisation established in 1988 to assist refugee survivors of torture and trauma rebuild their lives in Australia. STARTTS' services form a part of the NSW public health system through its recognition as an Affiliated Health Organisation (AHO). STARTTS is the NSW member of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT), with a proud 30-year history of successful services and projects; funded through a variety of government and non-government bodies including NSW Health, and the Commonwealth Departments of Health, Social Services and Home Affairs.

STARTTS' clients are survivors of torture and trauma in the context of organised violence and state terrorism, the majority of whom have arrived in Australia under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program. STARTTS' service model incorporates a large range of clinical and psycho-social interventions informed by the latest advances in neuroscience and evidence-based practice in relevant fields. Our service provision philosophy is predicated on a bio-psycho-social framework, in recognition of the complex interaction between this essential building block for personal and collective wellbeing, and pre-migration and 'normal life cycle' events post-settlement, which have the potential to impede the recovery of individuals from their traumatic experiences¹. As such, our service offer is broad in scope and includes assessment; counselling for all age groups; psychiatric assessment and interventions; family therapy; group interventions; body-focused interventions such as nutrition, massage, physiotherapy, acupuncture and pain management groups; support groups; programs for children and youth; advocacy and policy input; training for service providers; and various strategies to increase the capacity of support networks and refugee communities to sustain their members.

The focus of the STARTTS approach is on building capacity and empowering people and communities to take control over their own lives, using a strengths-based approach and

¹ Aroche, J., & Coello, M. (December 5-9, 1994), 'Towards a systematic approach for the treatment and rehabilitation of torture and trauma survivors: The experience of STARTTS in Australia.' *4th International Conference of Centers, Institutions and Individuals Concerned with Victims of Organized Violence: "Caring for and Empowering Victims of Human Rights Violations"*. DAP, Tagaytay City, Philippines, available at: <http://www.startts.org.au/media/Research-Doc-Towards-a-systematic-approach.pdf>

building on individual, family, community and cultural strengths. Further information about STARTTS' services and programs can be found at <http://www.startts.org.au/>.

STARTTS welcomes the opportunity to offer a contribution to the NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No 2 – Health, inquiring into and reporting on the current and future provision of health services in the South-West Sydney Growth Region, and address in our Submission below several key areas of focus outlined in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

The need for and feasibility of a future hospital located in the South-West Sydney Growth Region to service the growing population as part of the Aerotropolis land use plan;

The availability and shortfall of mental, community and allied health services in the South-West Sydney Growth Region

An investigation into the health workforce planning needs of the South-West Sydney Growth Region to accommodate population growth to 2050;

As a state-wide service situated in the heart of South-West Sydney, STARTTS welcomes the Portfolio Committee's interest in the expansion of health service provision into the area's Growth Region. STARTTS offices are located in Carramar, Fairfield, Liverpool, Blacktown, and Auburn as well as various rural and regional humanitarian settlement hubs, to help meet the trauma recovery needs of recently arrived communities of refugee background. STARTTS also provides outreach services from a range of locations in both Metropolitan Sydney (including Bankstown and Campbelltown) and the regions.

It is a well-known fact within the human services sector that the majority of recently arrived NSW humanitarian entrants have settled in the Fairfield and Liverpool Local Government Areas (LGA), with a corresponding significant increase in demand for government service provision, particularly in the areas of health, education, employment and disability services. Perhaps a less visible phenomenon is the emerging and noticeable pattern of post-settlement secondary migration movements into areas situated within the boundaries of Greater Liverpool, Camden and Campbelltown LGAs, i.e. the South-West Sydney Growth Region, by members of these communities; higher levels of affordable housing and more desirable lifestyle options possibly serving as influencing factors in individuals' and families' decisions to relocate. Census Data from 2016 captures these geographical transitions occurring across many communities we have historically worked with in South-West Sydney, including those from:

- Burma;
- Iran;
- Sudan/South Sudan;
- Vietnam;
- Iraq;
- Syria; and
- Afghanistan

The following report produced for Camden LGA by *profile.com.au* is illustrative of this trend: <https://profile.id.com.au/camden/birthplace>.

Campbelltown LGA, a historically rare settlement location of choice, is also experiencing an increased presence of these and other more established communities of refugee background. See this report for further details: <https://profile.id.com.au/campbelltown-sa/birthplace>.

STARTTS believes that given the current and multi-layered nature of a number of different pressures confronting Campbelltown and Liverpool hospitals, we are supportive of an exploration of the feasibility of a future hospital for this region, with all of the requisite resourcing conducive to a high-performing, patient, family and whole-of-community-centred and integrated model of healthcare.

As NSW's specialist torture and trauma counselling service, we have been heartened to learn of acknowledgements by other contributors to the Inquiry of the unique skillset base required of health professionals for successful engagement with and treatment of individuals and families from communities of refugee background; an ever-growing patient base across multiple health districts, but especially so in South-West Sydney Local Health District (SWSLHD).

In STARTTS view, there is need for a workforce adequately resourced to provide in-language (through a suitably trained interpreter and bi-lingual workforce), culturally appropriate and safe, as well as trauma-informed hospital and community-based services. This includes adequately resourced and trained health care interpreter workforce. In this regard, STARTTS has a proud record in partnering with both government and non-government agencies to deliver tailored training to frontline workers to support their interventions with individuals and communities of refugee background. From 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2019, our staff delivered 419 sessions of training, alongside seminars and presentations (or 1631 hours), for a total of 11, 544 participants.

Employment of community members of refugee backgrounds in designated culturally-specific health roles would serve the District well in its interest to learn about and develop targeted health strategies for this particularly vulnerable patient group. This is becoming increasingly important as refugee visa health requirements continue to be relaxed to allow those with chronic and complex health conditions, including disabilities, to resettle in Australia, and access supports via the NDIS and, for the elderly, Aged Care services.

These service models have proven to increase the confidence levels of affected communities in their engagement with the broader service system and is critical to healthy community development, given the complex and often overwhelming challenges communities of refugee background experience in their interactions with various bureaucratic institutions, including their service arms. In this regard, and given its particular relevance to the healing interventions our service offers at a community level, we commend SWSLHD on its *South Western Sydney Regional Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan to 2025* which we hope will extend to the Growth Region, as it clearly recognises the need for tailored approaches to mental health interventions in our service context. Such recognition is perhaps best demonstrated in the *Mental Health Community Living Supports for Refugees (MH-CLSR)*

Program delivered in South-Western Sydney by a New Horizons/STARTTS partnership since its announced rollout last year. There has been a strong demand for the Program since, and we anticipate further interest as these communities progressively migrate outwards into the Growth Region, where they are likely to remain a hidden population (including from a social cohesion perspective in the context of the Growth Region) with unmet needs, unless proactive measures like the CLSR continue in-place. Other unexpected benefits arising from STARTTS' participation in the Program to date have included strong networking opportunities with other leading stakeholders in the mental health service sector, and a capacity-building role for STARTTS in the area of training for health professionals who have not previously worked with communities of refugee background.

It is essential that health and education services are well integrated in the South-West Sydney Growth Region to enhance access and promote health of children, young people and their families. In the schooling context, STARTTS has served as strong health partner for educators in South West Sydney who are engaged with our School Liaison Program (SLP), funded by the NSW Department of Education since 2016. Young people of refugee background present as a particularly vulnerable segment of the community, and the SLP has delivered outstanding results to support their health and education outcomes as they progress key settlement milestones. A STARTTS interim evaluation of the Program recorded significant improvements in students' wellbeing, finding that of those interviewed:

- 97% felt happier as a direct result of STARTTS interventions;
- 83% reported experiencing an increase in friendships and sense of belonging;
- 61% reported improvements in the sleep quality and patterns;
- Teachers reported an increase of 80% in students' respect for peers and teachers;
- 54% reported improved attendance (46% stated that attendance was already strong pre-STARTTS intervention); and
- 87% reported improvements in academic performance (13% could not comment) and 86% reported improvements in concentration (14% could not comment).

Further, between 2016 and 2019, SLP Project Officers delivered 205 training sessions to 6,830 schools staff. The training evaluation results strongly indicate that the training has produced immediate and significant improvements in participants' self-reported knowledge of, and confidence toward, working with students from refugee backgrounds.

Finally, an evaluation of 3 Multi-school Clusters Networks (2 Sydney based and 1 rural/regional) revealed:

- Enhanced ability to identify and address common needs/challenges within strengthened professional networks;
- Enhanced opportunity to operate within a context of community of practice;
- Greater systemic collaboration between schools to address common needs and challenges;
- Increased systemic awareness of needs and trauma informed support available;
- Increased awareness of, and engagement with, non-school based services;

- Increased awareness, confidence and capability to provide support to students from refugee background;
- Enhanced connections with students' families; and
- Adaptation of teaching strategies, student enrolment and transition processes

These findings suggest that an expansion of a community-based mental health intervention, for an otherwise hard to reach population, might also benefit the Growth Region as more families of refugee background relocate to the area and its surrounds.

In conclusion, STARTTS supports development of comprehensive health care services for all residents in the growth region. Such services should be tailored to the specific needs of the wider CALD community and refugee communities in particular. The tailored approach would ideally consist of specialist services complemented by culturally aware and trauma informed mainstream health service.