



**Thriving
Multicultural
Communities**

THE MIGRANT CENTRE ORGANISATION INC.

Shop 22, TAFE Building, 91 Scarborough Street, Southport, QLD 4215

Postal address: PO Box 165 SBC, Southport QLD, 4215

Tel (07) 5591 7261

A submission by The Migrant Centre Organisation Inc trading as Thriving Multicultural Communities (TMC) in response to the Inquiry into the opportunities to improve mental health outcomes for Queenslanders

A submission by The Migrant Centre Organisation Inc trading as Thriving Multicultural Communities (TMC) in response to the Inquiry into the opportunities to improve mental health outcomes for Queenslanders

About us

Incorporated in 2001 as The Migrant Centre Organisation Inc., the organisation trades as Thriving Multicultural Communities (TMC). The objectives of TMC are to:

- support and advocate for the improved economic, social and cultural opportunities of people from all cultural backgrounds residing in Australia
- facilitate civic and community participation and skills building of migrants in Australia
- create strategies towards settlement, social inclusion and sustainable employment
- promote and enhance the benefits of multiculturalism and productive diversity.

In line with its objectives, the TMC provides a range of settlement support services primarily to newly arrived migrants and refugees. In addition to learning English, navigating a new system, understanding different social norms, securing education and employment, many refugees and migrants experience the additional pressure of social isolation, underemployment, reskilling and recognition of prior learning.

TMC takes a step-by-step approach to guiding people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with understanding and dignity, towards making the transition into their new community as successful as possible.

About our clients

TMC is often the first point of contact for clients who are disadvantaged jobseekers, vulnerable people experiencing domestic and family violence, those with mental health issues, at risk youth, and isolated seniors.

While the majority of clients presenting to the TMC are recently arrived refugees and migrants, over the past few years, we have seen:

- a significant increase in clients presenting with multiple concerns, including mental health issues
- an increase in the number of people requiring our services who have been in Australia for many years
- increased uncertainty and anxiety resulting from the onset of COVID and related issues including unemployment, isolation and family dysfunction.

In the past three years, TMC has supported over 700 people through its Settlement Services, Skilling Queenslanders for Work, and Domestic & Family Violence programs. The majority of these people have been in Australia for less than 5 years and have different cultural and religious background.

At least 40% of these people have mental health issues.

Following are a few examples of the diversity of clients with complex issues, including mental health issues that have been supported by TMC.

- G, 70 year old female of Austrian background, became increasingly isolated and would spend days in her apartment without seeing or speaking to another person. She was neglecting self-care (not eating, not looking after her appearance) and would get panic attacks when compelled to leave her apartment to buy groceries. After her divorce, she became increasingly disconnected from friends. She was supported to create her own self-care plan, received assessment for skills and mobility, matched her skills and interest to be an IT volunteer tutor for seniors group.
- Y, Japanese female in her 40s, with a young child, self-identified having anger management issues. She was unaware of GP-referred mental health support and community services. TMC supported her request for a GP Mental Health Care Plan, information on behavioural therapist in her suburb and referral to Griffith Social Work Clinic. She is now attending TMC's women's support group. Client has said she feels more empowered to deal with her mental health issues with greater knowledge and TMC support.
- S, Syrian male in his 40s, with complex mental health issues. TMC was contacted to provide socialisation as part of his exit plan from Gold Coast University Hospital's Melaleuca mental health unit. Regrettably, the client's treating psychiatrist and social worker were unable to fully support the client's needs and could not provide adequate information and follow-up support for TMC to assist with community connections and social activities.
- R, Ethiopian female in her 30s, is experiencing grief and loss after a broken relationship. She feels that the termination of her pregnancy was her fault. TMC provided information on GP MHCP and referral for therapy. Also information on local community support groups and access to TMC women's support group. She continues to visit TMC once a fortnight to connect with her caseworker.
- S, Congolese female in her 30s, single parent of young child, homeless. TMC is providing counselling and support after identifying major challenges including anxiety, mistrust and paranoia over her accommodation issues. We take the time to listen to (and reframe) her concerns about the housing application situation on the Gold Coast, her present living conditions in crisis accommodation, her plans for her child. She has access to TMC's women's support group.
- C, Australian-born male in his 40s, has issues of control and anxiety over family members; comes from dysfunction family background. Building relationship with C and assisting with building self-esteem through employment assistance.
- A, Ethiopian male in his early 20s, refugee background, disconnected from family, homeless. TMC assisted on practical level with food vouchers; family mediation; provided A with information on undertaking training in his field (donated laptop); facilitated connections with peers and community.
- M, Spanish-speaking male in his 70s, had suicidal ideation. His wife had passed away, estranged from his adult children, isolated, poor self-care. TMC assisted with connections to local Spanish-speaking social group, helped M to create his own self-care plan, provided access to digital literacy training, supported referral for counselling.
- A, 10yo born in Australia of Bosnia background survived a house fire, he was rescued from burning house which his father lit in an attempt to kill the whole family, after his rescue there was no assessment of his mental health after witnessing such a traumatic event, he lost ability to speak, had difficulty integrating at school. His mother turned to TMC for support for herself to be able to support him better.

Refugees and early arrival migrants present to TMC because local mainstream organisations have little ability to understand the underlying issues. They will often request that TMC organise an interpreter for the client. Unfortunately addressing the language barrier isn't the only obstacle properly assessing the client's needs.

Often the client will be referred directly to TMC, where speaking with someone who can understand the issues because they have had a similar lived experience.

TMC support services

As a key training and employment agency (recognised by Queensland Government in its award as Regional Winner of the 2021 Queensland Training Awards), TMC helps to break the cycle of unemployment by providing wrap-around support to complete accredited training, gain skills to be work-ready, enter the labour market and sustain meaningful jobs.

TMC provides a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment through activities that promote psychosocial and emotional support, such as:

- Comprehensive intake and assessment to establish a case plan.
- Counselling and access to TMC support psychosocial activities.
- Supported referrals to multilingual general practitioners, counsellors, therapists and/or local community programs. TMC has active networks with mental health organisations such as HeadSpace,
- 365 Women's Circle – art therapy, yoga, Domestic and Family Violence peer support group and health and wellness workshops (120 members)
- TMC Men's Club – supports youth and men aged 15 to 65 years from refugee background, experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, through fishing, men's coffee'n'chat groups, container gardening, music.
- Gold Coast Seniors – Active and Connected, funded by Department of Communities, which promotes community participation through adult learning and volunteering for older people.
- Digital Literacy for Seniors, supported by Good Things Foundation, assists older people to maintain social connections and continue with adult learning.
- Youth Connexion – After Dark Music and Pop In Pizza Nights
- TMC Living Room – a place to talk, listen and share that helps normalise worries and anxiety, reduces isolation (1,200 clients and participants).
- TMC Community Kitchen – cooking and sharing of food, picnics in the park
- #MeetUpTMC promotes social connections through Zoom where members share recipes, gardening tips, music.

These activities are delivered by skilled workers and volunteers. Demand has increased since mid-2020.

It is sometimes in these contexts that we are able to identify underlying issues, such as mental health, that are impacting on our clients.

TMC has assisted clients with mental health issues, through casework and supported referrals. TMC has also co-managed clients with Queensland Health, Gold Coast University Hospital, QPASTT, Department of Human Services social workers, TAFE Gold Coast social workers, Act For Kids, and MIFQ.

A critical part of our role is preparing clients with information and supporting referrals to other professionals and allied health services. Our work facilitates the client to make a connection with the best available services that can assist with their needs. It also assists the service to which we refer our clients to confirm the clients needs and provide the right kind of support.

TMC maintains a network of multilingual general practitioners and counsellors, and government/community programs such as Queensland Multicultural Mental Health and Griffith Social Work Clinic.

Our services are delivered by qualified workers, culturally-competent volunteers with lived experience, and university interns undertaking psychology studies.

Challenges

- People migrating to Australia are medically assessed before they are approved for migration. This assessment picks up any serious health issues but does not include assessing their mental health.
- There is an expectation of migrants to learn English, get a job, be social engaged, gain financial stability and support their family. Often mental health issues go unnoticed until there is a critical life event.
- Available mainstream services are not equipped to work with CALD clients who have mental health issues.
- Services that are able to work with CALD clients with special needs (e.g. survivors of torture and trauma) are located in Brisbane and have a 3 months waiting list.
- There is a lack of integrated mental health services on the Gold Coast.
- There is a real risk of CALD people with mental health issues slipping through the gaps in available mental health support services on the Gold Coast.

Solution

Establish a Gold Coast Mental Health Unit for CALD people to:

- Undertake an audit of local services to identify who has what for supporting people from different cultural backgrounds
- Capitalise on existing networks who use referral pathways to TMC, such as QLD Health, Gold Coast University Hospital, QPASTT, TAFE Gold Coast social workers, Act for Kids, MIFQ, Department of Human Services social workers, DVPC, Safe Haven.
- Identify/establish local pathways for community support and clinical care
- undertake a proper assessment of clients presenting with mental health issues
- provide community outreach through online and/or community workshops to promote mental health and well being
- having a safe place where there is trust

It would be cost effective to base such a unit within an established organisation that already has specialist services that can be leveraged.