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This edition of the NRPF Network briefing will be looking at voluntary returns. This is often a difficult topic for many practitioners to discuss with clients and an even harder topic for clients to consider. What we are hoping to achieve in this briefing is an overview of the issues regarding voluntary returns. Firstly, we recap the issues that were raised at the NRPF conference in July this year regarding assisting clients with voluntary return. We then have an outline of the service provided by Hotham Mission, an organisation in Melbourne, Australia, which works with asylum seekers at the final stages. We also have a report from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the support they are able to offer, including the new reintegration approach.

NRPF Conference Report – Feedback from Workshop on Voluntary Returns

On 4th July 2007, the British Red Cross and the NRPF network hosted the first national conference looking at the issue of destitute people from abroad who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). The aim of the conference was to explore the issues relating to NRPF, generate dialogue between stakeholders and improve outcomes for this group.

There were a number of workshops held on the day focusing on key areas such as local authority obligations to people with no recourse to public funds; entitlements to Section 4 support; entitlements of post 18 UASC and families at the end of the asylum process. We also held a workshop on Retuning Voluntarily and the following is an excerpt of the feedback from that workshop.

Key areas in which Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) could be improved:

- **Reliable information about countries people are returning to.** Voluntary returns need to be safe and sustainable. To improve confidence that return would be safe and sustainable, there must be reliable and trustworthy information about the conditions and facilities in the country to which the individual is returning.

- **Support for and monitoring of integration.** Anecdotal accounts suggest that some people returning on AVR programmes are not receiving assistance to integrate. The provision of assistance to reintegrate should be independently evaluated and individual returns monitored. It needs to be acknowledged that in some cases for return to be sustainable, people need to be able to link in to social networks when they return.
- **Better approaches to discussing assisted voluntary returns with people.** To initiate and have meaningful conversations with people about assisted voluntary return there needs to be a relationship of trust. However, such relationships are undermined by people's destitution.
- **Improving the process for assisted voluntary returns.** People are often unclear about where they are within the assisted voluntary returns process. It would help if individuals applying for AVR received written acknowledgement that their application has been received and written confirmation when an application for AVR has been accepted or refused.

Hotham Mission

The Asylum Seeker Project (ASP) based at Hotham Mission is the largest housing and advocacy agency for asylum seekers in Australia. It provides accommodation with outreach support, basic financial assistance as well as emotional, psychological and practical support via case management to asylum seekers without government entitlements or the right to work.

Working with failed asylum seekers towards voluntary return is an area in which the ASP has made notable progress in recent years, with a significant number of ASP clients with no further legal options in Australia choosing to repatriate voluntarily or, in some cases, gain residency in a 3rd country. Whilst the legislative, social and organisational context will fundamentally affect the way agencies can approach the issue, there are a number of key factors the ASP has identified which should be considered in maintaining good practice when working with clients around voluntary return.

Information Provision: From the point of first contact, it is important to assess clients' own understanding of their situation and provide them with as much information as possible regarding legislation affecting them and their legal options. Clients who are well informed are empowered and best placed to make realistic and considered decisions concerning their future options and determine their own destiny.

Early Intervention: Introducing the idea of return as a possibility as early as feasible is crucial in gauging clients' anxieties around this and assessing if fears are still well founded in fact in regards to changes that may occur or may have occurred to their home country situation since they departed. Secondly this allows clients to begin to come to terms with and prepare for the possibility in the future.

Thorough Case Exploration: The ASP has a full-time Client Services Researcher. The Researchers' involvement begins almost immediately after intake and the role is to review clients' case documents and submissions (with client consent) and research up to date in-country information. A case summary is then formulated, with the aim of simplifying an individual case so that workers involved (including legal practitioners) have a clearer understanding of all issues involved and the likely outcome. This has actually led to a number of revised submissions with positive decisions in recent months as well as a number of voluntary returns. Furthermore, in conjunction with clients' caseworkers the researcher explores possible 3rd country options by ascertaining whether a client has any family members or contacts in 3rd countries or any skills or interests in view to possible skilled migration.

Coordinated Response: One of the benefits of clear lines of communication and a coordinated network of support around a client – especially around the clients' asylum claim – are that clients are not given conflicting information or advice. The ASP have known clients who have made the extremely difficult decision to voluntarily return, change their mind and submit a new last-minute application against legal advice and on an ill-founded basis, due to suggestion from 'well-meaning' supporters.

Create Options: Although an advocacy agency, the ASP has worked closely and productively with the Australian Government's Department of Immigration over the last few years to find positive resolutions and outcomes for difficult cases. Clients' feelings of disempowerment and helplessness, lack of self-esteem and the mental health problems that have developed as a result of years of being rights-restricted can be greatly alleviated if they are given options when they are facing return including IOM repatriation money and repatriation assistance upon return (stressing the neutral status of IOM, so as clients are clear they are not being 'removed') and the temporary granting of work rights (minimum 3 months) to enable clients to raise some additional money for repatriation. The granting of study rights is also invaluable for clients' mental health and this can prepare them for future career and migration options to 3rd countries.

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Individuals need to feel adequately informed and treated fairly and respectfully as a human being.

Relationship Building:

Fundamental to any affective case management role is a mutually respectful and trusting relationship between caseworker and client incorporating consistency i.e. clients form strong relationships with a minimal number of support workers who are accessible at regular times as needed. In the case of each of the ASP's client's who voluntarily returned to their country of origin, they all thanked the agency for the genuine care and support they received and said without this they would not have had the strength to return and 'start again'.

In closing, in the ASP's experience, one of the greatest barriers to return for clients is a sense of injustice and that their case has not been properly heard and considered. If this can be overcome and a client feels they have been adequately informed throughout the asylum process and treated fairly and respectfully as a human being, they are significantly more likely to make the decision to return voluntarily.

For further information regarding Hotham Mission, please see www.hothammission.org.au

International Organisation for Migration - Facilitating voluntary return to countries of origin

Since 1999, the UK section of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has helped over 23 000 asylum seekers and illegal migrants who have wanted to return voluntarily to their home countries. Of these, the main countries of return have been Iraq, Afghanistan, Albania, Iran, Sri Lanka, Brazil and Zimbabwe.

Many of the migrants approaching IOM UK for assistance are people who have reached the end of the asylum process. Others choose to return for family reasons, or because they find life difficult in the UK. A large number of clients that IOM is able to assist are ones that are destitute or have no recourse to public funds.

Under the VARRP (Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme), asylum seekers receive help with obtaining travel documents, payment for flight tickets and assistance at check-in and arrival at the airports. Once back in their home countries, returnees also receive reintegration assistance through IOM to start up businesses or go on training courses.

Although IOM has no formal protection mandate, if it is brought to their attention that somebody is being detained or mistreated at arrival in their home country, they will raise this with the government and officials in the home country and try their best to resolve the problem. Incidents such as this are very rare however in returns that IOM are involved with.

People who are considered to be unlawfully present and have entered the UK through managed migration (visa overstayers and people who were smuggled/trafficked into the UK) return under the AVRIM (Assisted Voluntary Return for Irregular Migrants) programme. This is similar to the VARRP programme, but does not include the reintegration assistance component.

IOM also works internationally in a wide range of areas within the migration sector, for example migration health, migration research, labour migration, and counter-trafficking. It is an intergovernmental organisation consisting of 120 member states, and has offices in more than 100 countries.

Reintegration Assistance - A New Approach

Through a new enhanced reintegration package launched on 19th October 2007, IOM has adopted a more tailored approach to suit the returnee's individual needs. More emphasis is being put on pre-departure counselling and advice in order to provide the returnees with more specific information about what reintegration opportunities are available in their home countries. Under the new package returnees may also receive help to cover childcare fees and temporary accommodation upon their return, in addition to grants for business start-ups, job placements and education/training.

For further information about IOM and voluntary return, see www.iomlondon.org or call 0207 808 1085.

Greater emphasis now being put on pre-departure counselling and advice i.e. providing more specific information about reintegration opportunities.

Case Study – Ms M

Ms M from Zimbabwe had been in the UK with her two-year-old daughter since 2004 and was awaiting the outcome of her appeal against a negative asylum decision. Since she had come to the UK she was unable to work and was paying large amounts of money to a solicitor. She had some concerns about the situation in Zimbabwe, but eventually decided that it would be better for her and her child to return home than to remain unlawfully present in the UK with no status. She also had younger siblings that she needed to go back and care for.

She had been studying for an NVQ in beauty therapy, and said that she wanted to open a beauty salon upon her return to Zimbabwe. In August 2006 she applied to return through the VARRP programme.

IOM booked Ms M and her daughter on an ordinary passenger flight, and they were able to return to Zimbabwe within a month. Upon returning home, Ms M changed her mind about opening a beauty salon, and instead decided to open a security business. IOM provided the funding for the start-up. Ms M's business is being monitored by IOM's office in Zimbabwe for a year to ensure that she is receiving the support she needs.

"IOM's reintegration assistance does give returnees a good starting point. It will not solve all their problems but they will be able to start something which generates income to sustain their families" says Niklas Bergstrand from IOM UK. "Some people have the impression that nobody who comes to the UK would ever want to return to their home countries. The truth is that we have people contacting us every day for help to return."

The NRPF network would like to thank Simon Chugg, NRPF Social Worker, London Borough of Islington and Niklas Bergstrand, Communications Officer, IOM for assistance in writing this briefing.

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