

# FINAL REPORT SUMMARY

Improving access to mental health services for refugees and asylum seekers in the west - June 2017

## Background

In 2016 HealthWest received a small grant to enhance the work of the public mental health service system in the western metropolitan area of Melbourne in responding to refugees and asylum seekers who have a mental illness, or who are at risk of experiencing an episode of acute mental illness.

The existing Refugee and Asylum Seekers Mental Health Working Group (the Working Group) functioned as the project advisory group. The Working Group is part of the Mid West Area Mental Health Alliance and brings representatives from community and acute mental health services together with settlement, refugee and asylum seeker support services.

In summary the objectives of the project were to:

- Support service integration and coordination.
- Raise awareness about the barriers and enablers that affect access.
- Build workforce capacity.

The project was evaluated using surveys and through reflections from the Working Group.

## Supporting service integration and coordination

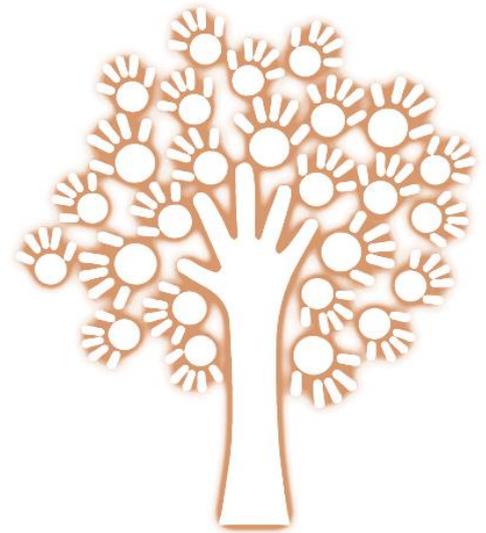
The Working Group updated a referrals pathways toolkit which was disseminated widely. This toolkit was particularly valued by the project participants as a practical solution to common challenges.

Project participants commented on the benefits of cross-sector networking and collaboration, with over 23 organisations involved throughout the project. Despite ongoing reforms in each of the respective sectors involved, participants maintained commitment to improving service integration and coordination. One participant commented:

*This project brought people to the table. It generated service development activities. It opened dialogue with the Department about future policy options. It was inclusive. It modeled collaborative practice. It is a foundation for future initiatives in this field.*

## Raising awareness about access barriers & enablers

Project participants commented that the project raised catchment awareness about access barriers, particularly in the context of the pending rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2018. The Working Group coordinated the *2018 & Beyond* forum to start a conversation in Melbourne's west about how the health and community service system will support refugees and



asylum seekers in 2018 and beyond. Over 50 workers from a range of services attended this forum. As a region there was great value in sharing the collective knowledge of the pending reforms and raising awareness of the potential challenges and opportunities. The forum was followed by a Management Round Table to engage senior management in the dialogue. A Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on NDIS was compiled by HealthWest. A second Round Table was coordinated six months later to explore the impact on asylum seekers and form a regional response.

A number of case studies were collected by project participants. These case studies explored some of the challenges and practical solutions for improving access, service coordination and care. The case studies were published and distributed as an educational resource for project participants and other interested organisations.

### Building workforce capacity

A number of practice sharing sessions and training opportunities were coordinated by the Working Group. The training opportunities were particularly valued by project participants.

A *Trauma & Living With Uncertainty* workshop was delivered by Foundation House and attended by approximately 20 participants, predominantly mental health workers. Almost all participants reported that they gained significant knowledge and confidence from the workshop. Several participants commented that they gained an understanding of the recovery framework and their role in the continuum. Participants' comments reflected a greater awareness of the lived experience of the clients and how trauma affects their presentation. With increased interest a *Cultural Responsiveness* workshop targeting settlement workers was delivered by Victorian Transcultural Mental Health with 15 participants. Another *Trauma & Living With Uncertainty* workshop is planned for 2017.

An *Alcohol and Other Drugs* workshop was delivered by Turning Point and attended by approximately 25 participants, predominantly settlement workers. The majority of these participants also reported that they gained significant knowledge and confidence from the workshop. Several participants commented that they gained an understanding of the stages of change and referral pathways. Participants' comments reflected a greater awareness of the client's choices and how to engage in conversations about alcohol and other drug use. Participants in this workshop expressed interest in participating in further workshops to gain a greater depth of understanding. A second workshop for approximately 40 workers was facilitated by Odyssey House at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.

### Conclusion

Importantly the project has assisted in maintaining and enhancing cross sector communication during a period of transition and change. This project provided the Working Group with shared priorities to work toward in collaboration with each other and demonstrated that additional resourcing for a multi-sector platform such as this can help to drive regional action and enable collaboration which will likely continue into the future. The Working Group will continue to operate under the auspice of the Mid West Area Mental Health Alliance and is currently planning for 2017/18.

HealthWest has also secured funding to coordinate a new project, *A Seat at the Table*, which seeks to bring young people from refugee and asylum seeker background together with service providers to promote mental health and participation in mental health services.

*This project was funded by the North West Melbourne Primary Health Network. The Refugee & Asylum Seeker Mental Health Working Group is part of the Mid West Mental Health Alliance.*

