



Knox City Council
Towards New Horizons



MIGRANT INFORMATION CENTRE
eastern melbourne

A.B.N. 27 084 251 669

KNOX ISLAMIC YOUTH PROJECT

EVALUATION REPORT

SEPTEMBER 2006

**Migrant Information Centre
(Eastern Melbourne)**

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Mervat Dahdoule (Project Officer)
September 2006

1. Background

In 2003 the Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) completed a needs analysis with the Muslim community in the Knox region. This research entitled “The needs of Muslim Families in the Rowville/Lysterfield Area”¹ identified that the needs of youth were an ongoing concern for the Muslim community. In 2004/2005 the MIC applied for funding from Knox City Council to undertake a project directed at meeting the needs of young Muslim people living in the City of Knox. In particular the project was to:

- Run four workshops on self esteem, image and strategies for dealing with prejudice
- Establish activity/discussion groups for young women and young men aged 12 – 24 years.

2. Establishing the project

In the initial stages of the project the project worker faced a number of difficulties in gaining access to the new committee of management at the Lysterfield Knox. Although the previous Imam had strongly supported the project, a new Imam had not yet been appointed and the committee of management at the Mosque required further information about the project and its aims and objectives before offering support to the project. Meeting times with the new committee were difficult to arrange, and much of the negotiations occurred over the phone with a committee member who communicated between the project worker and the other committee members.

The establishment of the project was also delayed due to the holy month of Ramadan (during which Muslims fast throughout daylight hours) which occurred in October to November 2005, followed by the Christmas New Year period and school holidays.

In early February 2006, the project received the support of the committee of management at the Mosque. It was agreed that a focus group meeting with Muslim youth would be held at the Mosque hall, and that the hall would be made available for future youth group activities, subject to availability².

3. Project activities

A focus group meeting was held at the Lysterfield Mosque hall in March 2006. Approximately 35 people attended this meeting which provided the opportunity for the project officer to promote the project as well as to gain an insight in to the types of activities/sessions needed. The issues raised by the group confirmed the findings of the needs analysis as their overwhelming response was the need for greater recreational and sporting opportunities.

¹ The report “The needs of Muslim Families in the Rowville/Lysterfield Area” is available on the MIC’s web page www.miceastmelb.com.au.

² The Rowville Community Centre was later selected as the venue to host the weekly Youth Group meetings as the Lysterfield Mosque hall was quite heavily utilised by different groups and the times available were unsuitable.

3.1 Program

In addition to issues raised by the youth focus group, the projects program was also established in consultation with parents through the creation of a steering group which met regularly throughout the course of the project. The steering group agreed that there was a need for greater recreational opportunities for Muslim youth, but they also raised issues concerning the need for information sessions directed at improving confidence and self esteem. Pride in oneself as a young Australian Muslim was seen as a necessary prerequisite to combat the negativity associated with Islam as propagated by the media's interpretation of recent world events.

The program commenced at the beginning of second term and included the following activities:

- Weekly Youth Group Meetings at the Rowville Community Centre
- Media Training
- Sports Clinic
- Martial Arts
- Rock Climbing
- Ice Skating
- Careers Expo
- Driver Education Course
- Girl's Positive Body Image Session
- Boy's Healthy Eating Session with Qualified Nutritionist

3.2 Promotion

Sessions were promoted extensively through flyers. Flyers were distributed at the Mosque, at language classes (eg Indonesian language school), at religious classes, in businesses frequented by Muslims such as Halal butcher shops, as well as through mail outs via the MIC mailing list.

Other Muslim organisations such as the Young Muslims of Australia (YMA) and Australian MADE also helped to promote events.

Also, the project worker personally distributed flyers and promoted the weekly youth group meetings to students at the local Islamic school, Minaret College. The youth group sessions were also promoted in the newsletters of the local schools such as Rowville Secondary College.

Sessions were also promoted through emails as well as through telephone discussions with the young people's parents. Word of mouth was a very effective tool in promoting events, as often youth would be more likely to attend sessions if they knew that their friends were also going.

3.3 Attendance

The group met weekly on Saturday afternoons throughout Term 2 at the Rowville Community Centre. The group was given access to the Youth Space facilities and equipment which included table tennis, X-box games, foosball, mini billiards and air hockey. Additional activities were also held during these sessions including arts and crafts such as beading, painting on canvas and decorating craft boxes. Also, when the

weather permitted, outdoor sporting activities such as soccer and basketball were held at the outside courts of the Rowville Community Centre.

Up to 15 young men and women attended the weekly Youth Group meetings. However, as these meetings were held on Saturday afternoons, the timing would sometimes coincide with other youth commitments such as sporting or social events (eg birthday parties). One of the parents who had been very supportive of the youth group program was keenly disappointed to learn of its meeting time as her child played competition basketball on Saturday afternoons, and so was not able to attend any of the meetings.

Attendance was also dictated by the availability of parents to drive the youth to the venue. Although centrally located, the limitations of public transport in the area (particularly during the weekend) made it difficult for youth to access sessions without relying on their parents to drive them.

Events held during the school holidays, such as the sports clinic which had over 40 participants, were generally well attended indicating that parents were more willing to be 'taxi drivers' at this time. Also, events to which parents were invited to attend, such as the media training with over 45 participants, were also well attended.

3.4 Feedback

Youth were asked to complete an evaluation feedback at the end of each session. The feedback from the weekly Youth Group meetings was generally positive, but on the occasions when it was not possible to go outside to play sports, the youth indicated their disappointment. The feedback also indicated that despite the wide variety of activities available, they wanted more activities to choose from including excursions (e.g. Lunar Park).

Feedback from the media training session was extremely positive and included comments such as:

"It was fantastic and very valuable opportunity. Thank you!!"

"This class was interesting and very informational but the fun thing about this was we learnt about how to react under pressure by the media."

"I really enjoyed the session we had today. It gave us great opportunities to get along and invite the media."

"It was very well organised! Well done!"

"Excellent"

"It was very good"

"It was really good that we got an opportunity to be under the camera and to be talking to a journalist."

"The session was worth taking time out to attend."

"It was a good session. I had fun."

Similarly, feedback from the sports clinic was equally positive with comments such as “Great Day”, “Excellent” and “When is the next sports day?”

4. Project outcomes

Several of the sessions were targeted to specifically address the issues of building self esteem and to provide strategies of dealing with negative stereotypes. These sessions included positive body image, healthy eating, media training, and therapeutic martial arts. The sports clinic also gave youth the opportunity to attempt new activities, and the sense of accomplishment in being able to perform them was a great morale booster, especially for the young women wearing hijab.

Other sessions also indirectly addressed these issues. Activities such as rock climbing and ice skating increased self esteem and demonstrated peer support as individuals were forced to place their trust and rely upon one another in order to perform the activities. The driver education program also boosted confidence as many of the youth had never driven a motor vehicle before, and their exhilaration in doing so was evident.

4.1 Build the skills and self esteem of young people so that they can make a better contribution in the wider community

The information sessions were instrumental in increasing self esteem and confidence in young people. The positive body image session, a girls only event, concentrated upon the unrealistic ideal of the stereotypical images of beauty as portrayed by the media and the marketing ploys that motivate women to aspire towards the unattainable.

The media training session was a joint collaboration between the MIC and Australian MADE. Doug Weller, a media consultant who had worked with the Muslim community previously to promote strategies of dealing with negative media coverage of Islam and Muslims, was contracted to hold a workshop.

The consultant emphasised that the journalistic fraternity were not on a mission to demonise Islam and Muslims, but that the nature of journalism meant that sensationalism sold newspapers and lifted network ratings. Although this information did not alleviate the intolerance experienced by attendees, it did offer a different slant on the motivation behind some of the media reports, and a better understanding that there was not a conspiracy out to ‘get’ Muslims.

In addition to discussing various strategies of dealing with negative media representations of Islam, the consultant demonstrated a very practical way of putting his theory in to practice; he suggested several hypothetical scenarios which were discussed in small groups before a representative from each group was interviewed by the consultant whilst being video taped. The video of each interview was displayed and the response of the interviewee was discussed with possible suggestions for improvement. These same people were involved in several interviews, with each interview becoming progressively tougher and more hard-hitting.

The media training session was well attended with over 45 participants. These included both parents as well as youth. The feedback responses were highly positive and indicated that the techniques learnt were useful tools not only in a media type

environment, but were equally valuable in day to day dealings when confronted with negative stereotyping and prejudice.

According to one of the participants, the media training session was “most enlightening, and very practical. It is something you can take and use immediately.”

A day long sports clinic in an indoor sports venue was held during the school holidays after second term. This event was very well attended with over 40 young Muslims participating in a range of different sporting activities including cricket, AFL football, soccer and basketball. The four instructors, three of whom were female, were all involved in competition level sports and proved positive role models for the young Muslim women in particular. The feedback from this event was extremely positive, with the majority of participants indicating that they were pleased.

4.2 Link young Muslims to existing services and opportunities

The project worker invited Rebekah Popplewell, Rowville Outreach Worker to attend one of the weekly youth meetings to talk about the services offered to youth by Knox City Council. Rebekah spoke about a range of issues including the weekly Friday afternoon sessions held at the Youth Space in the Rowville Community Centre, as well as some of the youth friendly facilities available in the Knox region such as the BMX track.

The project worker linked Muslim youth to the holiday programs offered by local councils giving youth an opportunity to experience new activities in a supervised environment and mix with other non-Muslim youth. On some occasions, the project worker accompanied the group on the excursions and assisted the organisations with supervision. This was important in order to encourage the parents to give permission for their children to participate, especially in the case of young women whose parents required the assurance that they would be supervised by someone they knew and trusted. It is envisaged that having established links with these organisations participants will continue to access the opportunities offered by local council holiday programs.

One of the programs offered by local councils was an excursion to the Herald Sun Careers Expo. This careers expo gave youth the opportunity to explore their education/career options independently from the influence of parents. As with most other activities, the feedback from this event was extremely positive.

The sports clinic created a greater awareness of the facilities and clubs available in the area, and provided the opportunity to experience different sporting activities in an inclusive environment. Youth were also made aware of the recreational opportunities available such as an ice skating rink, rock climbing facility and martial arts centre.

4.3 Reduce barrier for Muslim youth to access existing services, sports and recreation clubs

Increased confidence and greater self esteem are instrumental in breaking down barriers to access mainstream services and promoting greater participation in sports and recreational activities. Equally, a safe and secure environment provides the opportunity to become more adventurous by attempting to perform activities that would normally be considered to be too ‘risky.’

The provision of a 'Muslim friendly' environment allowed youth to draw strength from one another and become more willing to meet new challenges. In this inclusive environment, the wearing of the hijab does not prevent a Muslim girl from rock climbing or playing cricket or participating in a martial arts class.

Similarly, the clubs and facilities where these events were held responded positively to the religious and cultural needs of the Muslim community. For instance the martial arts centre was receptive to the idea of an ongoing female only martial arts class with a female instructor. The director of the indoor sports venue was also quite willing to cater to the needs of the Muslim community, and even went so far as to suggest that he would close the venue to other users and have female only staff present on those occasions when Muslim girls wanted to use the facility without their hijab.

5. Conclusion

The promotion of events through telephone conversations and word of mouth was the most successful method of promoting events. This was also an effective way of confirming attendance numbers as the community rarely did so of their own volition. However, this was time and resource intensive, and could be utilised only with people who had attended previous MIC functions or whom were known to the project worker.

The highest level of attendance was registered with those programs scheduled during the school holidays or those to which parents were encouraged to attend. This indicates that transportation appears to have been a major issue as attendance was influenced by the willingness of parents to drive their children to events. The correlation between the accessibility of transportation and the level of attendance was further indicated by a higher level of attendance at those events where parents drove other people's children to the sessions.

The main challenges posed during the course of the project were the limitations of time and resources which were further exacerbated by the initial difficulties encountered at the commencement of the project. Other challenges include the need for greater cultural and religious awareness and sensitivity by state and national sporting authorities, especially in regard to uniform requirements.

For example, the religious edict to dress modestly often prevents Muslim youth from participating in particular types of sport as they cannot adhere to the necessary dress codes that are required at competition level. This is of particular concern for girls as the uniforms used in some of the team sports such as basketball or netball often consist of very short skirts or shorts and sleeveless tops.

Strategies to overcome these obstacles could include something as simple as wearing tracksuit pants and long sleeved tops to coordinate with the existing uniform. However, even though local clubs may be sympathetic to the needs of the Muslim community, they are nevertheless governed by the rules and regulations of their official governing bodies, and are therefore powerless to implement such strategies independently.

Hence, there continues to be a need for the provision of greater community education as it will further reduce barriers for Muslim youth and provide them with greater opportunities to enable them to contribute more fully to the wider community.