



The Needs of Muslim families in the Rowville Lysterfield Area

A project funded by the Knox City Council

September 2003



Knox City Council
Towards New Horizons

MIGRANT INFORMATION CENTRE
eastern melbourne



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Lysterfield Area

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Thanks are extended to the Project Worker Lina Magraby for her commitment and enthusiasm for the project.

Special thanks and appreciation is extended to the Muslim families and community leaders for their contribution to the project in identifying the needs of the community and the strategies that can be implemented to meet those needs.

This project represents the first stage of the MIC’s work in supporting Muslim families in Knox and we look forward to continuing our work with the community to better meet their needs, to promote diversity and harmony within the broader community and to strengthen links within the local community and the service system.

Judy McDougall
September 2003

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) received funding from the Knox City Council to identify the needs of Muslim families in the Rowville/Lysterfield area. A Project Worker was employed to undertake the research which involved two discussion groups with women aged 20 to 40 years and 40 to 60 years and in depth interviews with the Imam from the Lysterfield Mosque, a local Muslim doctor and a community leader.

Several key issues were identified for Muslim families in Knox. This report provides an overview of those issues and a recommendation for the MIC to continue to work with the community to plan and to implement activities and projects that can meet these needs. The issues identified by the community related to:

- Health and fitness for women,
- Halal food,
- Schools,
- Increased understanding of Islam within the wider community, and
- Social and recreational activities for Muslim families.

1.1 Health and Fitness for Women

1.1.1 Swimming and exercise programs for women

Muslim women including young women require access to exercise programs and swimming facilities that provide privacy from the general public. To maintain health and fitness, there is a need to identify affordable swimming and exercise facilities that can provide privacy and programs for women and young children and to promote these facilities to the community.

1.1.2 Sporting and recreational activities for young people

The community perceived that young Muslim men required a recreational club to promote health and fitness. Youth have indicated an interest in soccer but they do not believe that existing local clubs can meet their needs in relation to timing of training and game sessions and the uniform, which does not meet Islamic dress code requirements.

Youth groups can provide opportunities for recreational sports and social activities that promote physical activity, relationships and self-esteem. There is a need to work with the community to establish youth groups for young people.

Nevertheless, there are advantages in joining existing clubs particularly in relation to accessing established sporting facilities, playing as part of a team in a league and having resources to cover running costs including public liability insurance. Further activities to work with youth services and sporting clubs to break down barriers for young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds are required.

1.1.3 Islamic counselling services for families in crisis

The Islamic community expressed a need for professional counselling services that have an understanding of Islam and social issues that affect Muslim families in crisis. Many Muslim families believe that counselling services do not understand religious

beliefs and cultural traditions when addressing problems experienced by Muslim families.

Although there are some supports within the Muslim community, there is a need to promote mainstream family support services to Muslim families including how they can access them and assist them in times of difficulty. There is also a need to provide cross-cultural training to mainstream service providers to increase their understanding of Islam and family traditions so they can provide a culturally appropriate response to Muslim families in crisis.

1.1.4 Health promotion

Muslim families require information about healthy eating, preventative health care and health promotion activities.

1.2 Halal Food

The community identified the need for Halal food to be available in childcare centres, schools and meals on wheels programs. Halal food is an important issue for Muslims and there are concerns within families that pre-school aged children are receiving non-halal food in childcare centres, halal food is not available in schools and elderly people cannot utilise 'Meals on Wheels' because halal food is not offered.

Muslim families are keen to work with childcare centres, schools and local government to increase the availability of halal food and to provide training for teachers and service providers on Islamic beliefs and traditions including halal food products and preparation.

1.3 Schools

A number of issues were raised in relation to schools and Muslim children. These issues related to halal food as mentioned above, rooms for students to perform their prayers and flexibility in school uniforms to meet Islamic dress codes.

1.4 Community Information and Education

A number of issues were identified in relation to community information and education including:

- Islam in childcare centres
- Increasing understanding of Islam within the wider community
- Islamic publications in public libraries
- Islam and the medical sector

Due to recent world events, many Muslims are concerned that Islam is either misunderstood or misinterpreted and they would like to reach the wider community through a community education program. The MIC in partnership with Young Muslims of Australia has developed a women's only event to promote harmony and to increase community understanding of Islam and the Islamic dress code and to reduce negative stereotypes. The event entitled "My Image, My Dress, My Choice" has been held in Boroondara, Manningham, Maroondah, Monash and Whitehorse and it has been highly successful with positive feedback from both Muslim and non-Muslim women who have attended. The MIC will seek funding opportunities to hold the event in Knox.

In addition, the MIC has received funding through the Living in Harmony program funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs to work with schools, the Mosques, Christian churches and other religious communities. The project involves holding community events in Knox, Manningham, Monash and Whitehorse that promotes harmony and increases understanding of Islam within the wider community. This project was strongly supported by the Knox Inter-faith Group and it will commence in Term 4 of 2003, and continue throughout 2004.

1.5 Recreational Activities for Muslim Families

Muslim women expressed an urgent need for an affordable community hall where they can gather for social and recreational activities.

1.6 Recommendation

The issues identified by the Muslim community suggest that a variety of strategies may be necessary in order to achieve the expressed goals and outcomes. In developing future strategies to meet the needs identified by the community, it is recommended that a working group be established auspiced by the MIC.

Using a community development approach, the MIC will establish a working group with members of the Muslim community to plan and implement activities and projects that meet the needs of the community identified through this research.

The aim of the working group will be to identify and to facilitate:

- Sustainable projects and programs to meet community needs,
- Partnerships with mainstream service providers,
- Cross cultural awareness within the wider community,
- Promotional strategies for activities and events, and
- Funding opportunities where necessary.

2. INTRODUCTION

In 1999, the Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) established a Muslim women's group to identify and meet the needs of Muslim families in the eastern region. Using a community development approach, the group met regularly during school terms for 3 years to develop and to implement programs that met community needs. A range of programs were implemented including swimming for Muslim women, an Active for Life program promoting healthy exercise, health promotion initiatives, social groups, a Muslim playgroup, an aged care forum and an event "My Image, My Dress, My Choice" to promote harmony and understanding within the wider community. Although these initiatives were highly successful, it did not include the Muslim community residing in the Rowville/Lysterfield area.

There are two Mosques in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne – one in Doncaster and the other in Lysterfield. A number of Muslim families from a range of ethnic backgrounds reside in localities surrounding the Mosques. To date, the MIC has worked extensively with the Muslim community residing in Manningham. It was through our work with this group that it was identified that the MIC should work with Muslim families in Knox to identify and meet their needs.

3. BACKGROUND

The MIC received funding from the Knox City Council 2002/2003 Community Grants Program to employ a project worker to complete a needs analysis of the Muslim community residing in the Rowville/Lysterfield area.

The women of the Muslim community along with various Muslim community leaders were interviewed to identify their community needs and concerns. As a result of the consultations held with the Muslim community, several key issues were raised. This report provides a summary of the identified needs of the Muslim community as well as identifying practical suggestions for meeting those needs.

4. METHODOLOGY

Five consultations were conducted with the Islamic community as part of the study. Two discussion groups were held with Muslim women aged 20 to 40 years and 40 to 60 years, and three interviews were conducted with the Imam of Lysterfield Mosque, a female Muslim General Practitioner residing in the Knox area and working at a large public hospital and a retired accountant who works extensively within the community.

First Consultation: Women's Group (20 to 40 years)

The first consultation was conducted with a group of 19 women. The women came from various ethnic backgrounds including three different Arab countries, two Asian countries, two African countries and two European countries.

Second Consultation: Women's Group (40 to 60 years)

The second consultation was conducted with a group of 15 women, predominantly from an Arab background. However, there were two women from African and two women from Asian backgrounds.

Third Consultation: Imam of Lysterfield Mosque

An interview was conducted with the Imam of Lysterfield Mosque. The Imam represents a figure of Islamic authority to the Muslim community.

Fourth Consultation: Muslim Female Doctor

The doctor with whom the interview was conducted currently resides in the Knox area and works at a large public hospital. This woman was chosen on the basis of her experience in dealing with medical issues that affect the Muslim community.

Fifth Consultation: Retired Accountant

The person chosen for this interview was a male Muslim retired accountant who is currently very active in community work.

5. THE NEEDS OF MUSLIM FAMILIES

Several key issues were identified for Muslim families in Knox. These issues related to:

- Health and fitness for women
- Halal food
- Schools
- Increased understanding of Islam within the wider community
- Social and recreational activities for Muslim families

5.1 Health and Fitness

A number of issues were identified in relation to health and fitness:

- Swimming and exercise programs for women
- Sporting and recreational activities for young people
- Islamic counselling services for families
- Health promotion

5.1.1 Swimming and exercise programs for women

The community identified the need for Muslim women to access a gym and a swimming pool. Exercise is important to maintain health and for Muslim women and there are issues related to privacy that impact on whether they could access a gym or pool facility. Muslim women need to access women's only facilities that ensure privacy from the general public.

The Islamic dress code requires women to dress modestly and cover their hair in public places once they reach puberty, particularly from men who are not family members. This requirement makes it impossible for them to join mixed gyms and to access public swimming facilities. As a result, Muslim women across Melbourne hire suitable facilities after hours that provide privacy. Indoor swimming and gym facilities with glass walls and open changing areas are not suitable for the community.

Approximately five years ago, a member of the community approached a small, privately owned gym in the Dandenong area and organised for Muslim women to use the premises on Sunday afternoons between 4pm and 6pm when it was closed to the general public.

The facility provided opportunities for women to utilise a small gym room, a large swimming pool, a sauna and showers. No staff were present except for the gym owner who remained in the reception area at all times. The women were charged an entry fee of \$2 for use of the pool, spa and shower, and a further \$2 for using the gym room, which contained some exercise machines. The fee was charged per person including children regardless of age to cover the costs for hiring the facilities.

Initially many women and their children attended. However, numbers gradually decreased causing a raise in prices and eventually causing loss of access to the premises, as the entry fees no longer covered the hiring costs.

The reasons given for the failure of the program included that many women brought their young children with them so they could use the pool. As a result, the adult pool became full of women and children paddling around making it difficult for anyone who wanted to swim laps. Therefore, the women who attended eager to swim eventually lost interest and stopped going. In addition, many women with young children became frustrated because they wanted professional supervision for their children so they could enjoy the facilities themselves. These women did not have access to childcare. Another reason for the failure of the program involved the lack of knowledge of how to use the gym equipment and the subsequent fear of misuse causing injury.

Muslim women have limited or no access to community-based women's only swimming and fitness facilities in the local area. Access to private facilities raises issues in relation to covering hiring costs, which would increase if lifesavers and exercise staff were provided, and the need for facilities that could provide childcare or supervised programs for young children. Programs in other local government areas have also faced issues with sustainability due to costs.¹

There is a need for the community to identify appropriate facilities in the Knox/Lysterfield area and to seek funding opportunities to subsidise a program with the longer-term aim to provide fitness and swimming programs that can be widely promoted to attract numbers that can cover costs.

5.1.2 Sporting and recreational activities for young men

The consultations identified that young Muslim men were keen to establish sporting teams as a means of physical exercise and recreation. The youth expressed a particular interest in soccer and revealed that they had previously formed a number of teams but rarely got to play because they could not access sporting grounds.

They felt reluctant to join an existing local club because training and game sessions were scheduled at times when their work and school schedules did not allow them to attend training and/or game sessions and the uniforms did not comply with the Islamic dress codes.

The youth were keen to establish their own teams giving them the flexibility to work out their own schedule and dress code. The main problem, which they face, is finding sporting grounds where they can hold training and game sessions. Youth groups can provide opportunities for recreational sports and social activities that promote

¹ See "Swimming for Muslim Women – An Evaluation Report" MIC March:2001 on the MIC's web site www.miceastmelb.com.au. Other programs have been established in Broadmeadows, Reservoir and Brunswick. These programs have generally been subsidised by funding bodies for specific periods.

physical activity, relationships and self-esteem. There is a need to work with the community to establish youth groups for young people.

Nevertheless, there are advantages in joining existing clubs particularly in relation to accessing established sporting facilities, playing as part of a team in a league and having resources to cover running costs including public liability insurance.

The MIC completed an audit of services and sporting clubs in Manningham to identify a framework for measuring “youth friendliness” and “culturally appropriate services and programs”.² The research also identified barriers and strategies for young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in accessing local services and clubs. Sporting clubs were interviewed and it was found that all those that participated were keen to make their clubs accessible to all young people. These clubs indicated they were willing to address cultural issues that impact on communities including the types of issues identified by the Muslim youth in Knox.

Further work needs to be completed with clubs in Knox to overcome the barriers experienced by Muslim youth so that they can join existing clubs. This would provide them with the necessary facilities that they require in order to play competition sports including soccer.

5.1.3 Islamic counselling services for families

The Islamic community expressed a need for professional counselling services that have an understanding of Islam and social issues that affect Muslim families in crisis. Many Muslim families believe that counselling services do not understand religious beliefs and cultural traditions when addressing problems experienced by Muslim families. Therefore, families tend to seek advice and assistance from the Imam of the Mosque who has limited knowledge of family law and support services that could assist these families.

The Islamic Social Services Agency was established in Dandenong to support Muslim families in crisis across Melbourne. Muslim professionals who volunteer their time to provide counselling to Muslim families established the agency. The agency is also negotiating with the Department of Human Services to register as a foster care service for Muslim children who are removed from the family home to ensure that they are placed with another Muslim family. This agency is an important resource for both Muslim families and mainstream family support services that can access secondary consultation through the agency to better meet the needs of Muslim families.

Nevertheless, as the agency has limited resources and it does not have paid workers, there is a need to promote mainstream family support services to Muslim families including how they can access and assist in times of difficulty. There is also a need to provide cross-cultural training to mainstream service providers to increase their understanding of Islam and family traditions so they can provide a culturally appropriate response to Muslim families in crisis.

5.1.4 Health promotion

Members of the Islamic community expressed a need for education regarding preventative medicine techniques, including community education and information

² See the “Manningham Youth Project” report on the MIC’s website www.miceastmelb.com.au/documents/MYAFinal.htm.

about the importance of regular exercise, healthy eating, and regular medical checks, particularly for people who fall in the high-risk category due to family history or age.

There is a need for health promotion activities to be targeted at the Muslim community in appropriate community languages.

5.2 Halal Food

According to Islam, the term “halal food” is mainly concerned with the consumption of animals. The Koran (the Islamic holy book) gives clear guidelines on the animals that can be slaughtered for consumption, which includes only herbivorous animals and sea creatures.³ The Koran forbids the consumption of pig meat, blood, and dead animals. Furthermore, the method of slaughter is Islamically specified so that the animals that can be consumed must be slaughtered in a specific way to be deemed halal.

The method of preparation is also important in deeming a food as halal. The machinery and utensils used to prepare food must not be the same as those used with non-halal meats and ingredients.

There are many food products that contain non-halal ingredients such as gelatin and goods containing animal by-products. If these ingredients come from an animal that has not been slaughtered according to Islamic methods, the food containing these ingredients becomes “harim”, that is forbidden.

The issues that were identified by the Knox Muslim community in relation to halal food included providing halal food in:

- Schools
- Childcare Centres
- Meals on Wheels

5.2.1 Halal foods in schools

The Islamic community feels that their children are disadvantaged in terms of what is available for them in school canteens. Much of the hot food supplied by schools such as pies, sausage rolls, burgers, etc. cannot be consumed by Muslim children. Also much of the confectionary, biscuits, and ice creams contain non-halal ingredients making these foods inconsumable for Muslim children.

Muslim parents would like schools to provide some halal foods in their school canteens for their Muslim students. They are keen to work with schools to assist them in selecting halal foods for the canteen and to provide education sessions on halal food and preparation.

5.2.2 Halal food in childcare facilities

Whilst children of school age can generally make decisions about the food they can and cannot eat, pre-school aged children in childcare centres are too young to make this decision. This means that parents must prepare the food for their children when they take them to childcare. Parents indicated that there has been many incidences when children have been given non-halal food even if parents have advised childcare workers of their requirements. This does not occur due to lack of care from the childcare facility but rather a lack of understanding that while certain foods appear

³ This does not apply to periods of severe famine where people can eat what is available to survive.

acceptable, due to their ingredients these foods become unacceptable according to Islam.

Muslim parents would like a forum for educating childcare centres about what food is Islamically appropriate as well as investigating the possibility of making halal foods available to their children in centres.

5.2.3 Halal ‘Meals on Wheels’

The elderly Islamic community expressed a need for services such as ‘Meals on Wheels’ to supply halal food. Culturally appropriate food for ‘Meals on Wheels’ has been an issue for a number of CALD communities and the Department of Human Services (DHS) has funded pilot projects to develop service models that address this issue.

DHS are currently reviewing these projects to identify the best process for providing these meals. Issues that need to be addressed include food preparations, storage and delivery and cost effectiveness. Our research has reinforced the need for halal food for elderly and disabled Muslims in the Knox area.

5.3 Schools and Muslim Children

A number of issues were identified in relation to schools and Muslim children including:

- The availability of Halal food
- The Islamic dress code and school uniforms
- Prayer in schools

5.3.1 The availability of Halal food in schools

As discussed in the section above, the availability of halal food in schools was identified as a major issue for Muslim families. Our research identifies the need for Muslim families and schools with significant numbers of Muslim students to work together to address the needs of students and their families.

5.3.2 The Islamic dress code and school uniforms

School uniforms that meet the requirements of the Islamic dress code for both males and females was identified as a major need for the Muslim community. This issue affects all school uniforms including sports uniforms.

Once young people reach puberty, many Muslim girls wear modest clothing exposing only their face and hands and Muslim boys wear clothing that covers them from their waist to their knees. Meeting these Islam dress codes may be achieved by working with schools to modify the uniform to better meet the requirements of Muslim students.

5.3.3 Prayer in schools

Muslims parents are concerned that their children are missing their prayers due to the fact that some schools do not provide a quiet room where students can go to perform their prayers.

Prayer is one of the five pillars of Islam and it is the core of being a Muslim. The five prayers should be conducted at their allocated times, however, if for reasons beyond control a prayer is missed, then it can be made up at a later time. It is, however,

important that Muslims exhaust every means possible in order to perform their prayers at the appropriate times.

One Muslim parent who participated in the consultations described her experience in trying to locate a school that would allow her children to pray. She approached three primary schools to discuss the matter – the first two were unable to provide a prayer room and the third school was able to provide a prayer room.

At the third school where her child was enrolled, the principal assured her that if an appropriate space could not be located in the school, the children could use his office for their prayer. The previous two schools advised that they were unable to provide a prayer room as they were responsible for all students within their care during school hours and a staff member needed to be with students at all times. They could not guarantee that a staff member would be available to accompany the children for prayer.

The Muslim community is keen to work with schools to resolve the issue and provide cross-cultural training on Islam for both students and teaching staff. The MIC has received funding through the Living in Harmony grants program 2003/2004 funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs to increase understanding within the wider community of Islam. The program includes forums for teachers, students and their parents in schools in Knox, Manningham, Monash and Whitehorse.

5.4 Community Information and Education

A number of issues were identified in relation to community information and education including:

- Islam in childcare centres
- Increasing understanding of Islam within the wider community
- Islamic publications in public libraries
- Islam and the medical sector

5.4.1 Islam in childcare centres

Many parents are concerned that Islam is not being reinforced in childcare centres through the celebration of multiculturalism and Islamic festivals and holy days. Parents are keen to work with childcare facilities and preschools to incorporate the celebration of Islamic festivals and beliefs in activities and curriculum.

In addition, a Muslim playgroup would enable Muslim mothers to provide activities through play that reinforce Islamic beliefs and celebrations for preschool aged children.

5.4.2 Increasing understanding of Islam in the wider community

Due to recent world events, many Muslims are concerned that Islam is either misunderstood or misinterpreted and they would like to reach the wider community through a community education program. The MIC in partnership with Young Muslims of Australia has developed a women's only event to promote harmony and to increase community understanding of Islam and the Islamic dress code and to reduce negative stereotypes. The event entitled "My Image, My Dress, My Choice" has been held in Boroondara, Manningham, Maroondah, Monash and Whitehorse and it has been highly successful with positive feedback from both Muslim and non-

Muslim women who have attended. The MIC will seek funding opportunities to hold the event in Knox.

As mentioned above, the MIC has received funding through the Living in Harmony program funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs to work with schools, the Mosques, Christian churches and other religious communities. The project involves holding afternoon teas in Knox, Manningham, Monash and Whitehorse for the whole family that promotes harmony and increases understanding of Islam within the wider community. This project was strongly supported by the Knox Inter-faith Group and it will commence in Term 4 of 2003 and throughout 2004.

5.4.3 Islamic materials in public libraries

During consultations, it was suggested that it would be beneficial for the community as a whole, for public libraries to obtain Islamic materials such as books and videotapes. Public libraries determine community requests for publications in other languages on the basis of demographics. However, the community was primarily referring to materials in English.

Religious texts and publications are held in public libraries. At the Knox library, people can make suggestions for specific titles to be ordered directly with the librarian or people can complete the feedback sheet “Your Comments” available at the library counter, making suggestions about materials they would like available through the public library. A proposal can also be written to the Collection Development Team at the library requesting further publications. The team will consider the proposal in relation to the needs of the community as whole.

5.4.4 Islam and the medical sector

Privacy for Muslim women in public hospitals is a major issue of concern. Women may be placed in mixed sex rooms and attended to by male nursing staff. This situation becomes very distressful for Muslim women. There was an expressed need to educate doctors and medical staff about Islamic beliefs and practices in order to achieve harmony between the individual’s medical needs and their spiritual well being.

The main issue here is to educate the medical sector about issues that may affect their Muslim patients. Cross-cultural training programs are required for both hospital staff and general practitioners.

5.5 Community Recreation

Many of the issues already discussed relate to community recreation and social activities. A further issue identified by the Muslim community related an urgent need for an affordable community hall where they can gather for social and recreational activities.

Further research is required to identify the availability of affordable community venues in the local area for regular use by the community for functions and social activities.

6. RECOMMENDATION

The issues identified by the Muslim community suggest that a variety of strategies may be necessary in order to achieve the expressed goals and outcomes. In developing future strategies to meet the needs identified by the community, it is recommended that a working group be established, auspiced by the MIC. The MIC will seek funding through the Knox Community Grants Program to support the implementation of strategies to meet identified community needs such as exercise programs for women, health promotion activities and community education programs.

Using a community development approach, the MIC will establish a working group with members of the Muslim community to plan and implement activities and projects that meet the needs of the community identified through this research. Establishing Muslim community working groups will support the Muslim community to contribute towards developing practical solutions to the identified needs. It will also give them an active role in identifying and implementing strategies, which address their needs.

The aim of the working group will be to identify and to facilitate:

- Sustainable projects and programs to meet community needs,
- Partnerships with mainstream service providers,
- Cross cultural awareness,
- Promotional strategies, and
- Funding opportunities where necessary.