



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMY AND GENDER AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY
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Submission Cover sheet

Inquiry into Unpaid Work

Submission number: 14

Date authorised for publication: 12 June 2024



MARSS Australia Inc.

Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services

Patron: His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd)
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory
Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality
Inquiry into Unpaid Work

24 May 2024

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: INQUIRY INTO UNPAID WORK IN THE ACT

I am writing on behalf of the Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services (MARSS) in relation to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT. I am the Interim Chief Executive Officer of MARSS.

a. Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services (MARSS)

MARSS stands for Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services. It is a Canberra-based community not-for-profit organisation that provides a range of settlement services to migrants, refugees, humanitarian entrants, and asylum seekers in Australia. It was established in 1980 as a Migrant Resource Centre and incorporated in 1983. MARSS helps new arrivals successfully settle into their new communities by providing them with the support and resources they need to build a new life in Australia.

MARSS provides a wide range of services, including assistance with finding housing, accessing health care, and enrolling in education and training programs. The organisation also provides language and cultural support services, to help clients better understand and navigate Australian society.

MARSS is funded by the Australian government and ACT government and operates in partnership with other community organisations, agencies, and local businesses. The organisation is committed to promoting social inclusion and supporting the successful settlement of migrants and refugees in Australia.

b. The experience of people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in the ACT

Many clients from refugee backgrounds predominately arrive in Australia without jobs. Many do not speak English. Some of the community members may have had their education curtailed because of poverty or war. Thus, finding employment can be particularly problematic for a person who is unable to communicate in English, who might have their qualifications from their countries of origin not recognised by the Australian authorities, or who might not have had the chance to work in their countries of origin (for example, women from countries governed by totalitarian regimes, where women are not permitted to work). Although many migrants may come to Australia via the skilled visa program, many migrants might experience similar issues. The question becomes how can a person, facing such challenges, build up their resume so that they are able to enter the Australian job market?

c. Volunteering at MARSS

Since its inception, MARSS has employed volunteers to help support people from migrant and refugee backgrounds access services and supports that they may need, as well as exercise their human rights. The spectrum of tasks that volunteers undertake encompass teaching English, administrative duties, working at reception, helping people to fill in forms such as Centrelink forms, supporting them during social activities (for example, a trip we did with people from refugee and migrant communities on the South Coast), at cultural festivities, cooking for events etcetera. It is evident that MARSS could not work effectively without the valued input of our volunteers.

It is our experience that most volunteers want to do this work for altruistic purposes, aligned to a dedication to making a positive impact in the lives of people experiencing vulnerability. They do this without expectation of payment for their services, but because they love what they do, are passionate about their work, and are dedicated to making a difference.

It has been our experience that the key to nurturing a positive volunteering experience is to ensure that the organisation engaging volunteers sets up the proper support to support, such as registration, ensuring proper checks are provided such as National Police Check and Working for Vulnerable People registration, and providing a proper induction. A volunteers policy is needed to ensure that the volunteer parameters and supports are properly provided. Training of volunteers is imperative, so that they can learn what is expected of them.

Volunteering is a two-way street, and volunteers must be able to get something out of the experience. This could be a segue-way to other employment opportunities, via resume building or even a job at MARSS. We have several employees in MARSS from a refugee background who started out their careers as volunteers.

Showing appreciation of volunteers is also important. We do this during National Volunteer Week, highlighting their work on our social media. Every year we have a volunteers Christmas Party, where we give them certificates of appreciation and gifts.

We therefore highly value our volunteers and the important role they contribute to the work of MARSS.

d. Recommendations

- Provide funding to organisations such as MARSS, to support volunteering programs;
- Create events that annually and regularly show appreciation of volunteers, provide the volunteers with gifts of appreciation; and
- Grant awards to volunteers to show appreciation for them.

I wish the Committee well in its deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

Sonia Di Mezza
Interim CEO
Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services (MARSS)