

# Don't stress. We're right here with you: Impact of a volunteer program assisting refugees to access health services

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## INTRODUCTION

The NSW Refugee Health Service (RHS) established a volunteer program in 2017 to assist our refugee clients get to their health appointments. Refugees can experience significant barriers in accessing and engaging with healthcare services facing barriers such as language, transport, and lack of familiarity with the healthcare system.<sup>(1)</sup>

A lack of trust in healthcare providers and poor use of interpreters by healthcare staff are other major barriers.<sup>(2,3,4)</sup>

Volunteers are recruited and trained to take clients to health appointments, usually by public transport, and to increase refugees' knowledge and confidence in using health services.

A volunteer manager coordinates the program and supports the volunteers.

## AIM

To understand the impact of the RHS volunteer program on refugees' experiences accessing health care.

## METHODS

In depth interviews were held with volunteers, refugees and asylum seekers who had been assisted by the program (clients) and RHS staff who had referred to the program (staff). Clients who had received help to attend multiple appointments by a volunteer/s were selected for the period Mar 2020 to Apr 2022. Clients were predominately from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, the main client groups seen by RHS. Bilingual Community Educators and staff familiar with the respective communities invited clients to participate. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Where an interpreter had been used, only the English translation was transcribed. Each transcript was reviewed for accuracy by the research team and analysed thematically. The study was approved by the HREC of SWSLHD (2021/ETH01339). All participants provided informed consent.

## RESULTS

Interviews (30-45 minutes each) were completed with four volunteers, four clients and four staff respectively. Key findings included:

### VOLUNTEERS-LINKS TO HEALTH CARE AND BEYOND

Volunteers played a vital role in facilitating access to health care, especially for clients with added vulnerability such as disability.

Volunteers assisted in other practical ways too, linking new arrivals to services eg. employment websites or providing comfort and reassurance. They advocated on behalf of clients ensuring interpreters were available at appointments and communicating clients' needs back to the health care team.

### IMPACT ON CLIENTS

Clients described how the interactions with volunteers provided a positive, respectful experience, something they did not always encounter in society. Volunteers were also able to decrease the anxiety of navigating a health system that was unfamiliar. Staff and volunteers spoke of the positive change in refugees' knowledge of the health and transport systems respectively through their contact with volunteers. The volunteers also provided a means of social interaction for clients who were often very isolated and potentially this had a positive effect on their adjustment to a new life in Australia.

### SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers spoke of the organisation and structure of the program and how this enabled them to effectively support refugee clients. They had a clear idea of their role and felt supported. Although structured, volunteers and staff commented on the adaptability of the program to respond to the changing needs of both clients and volunteers. However, the lack of volunteer availability also caused frustrations.

## CONCLUSION

People from refugee backgrounds face many barriers in accessing health care and this can have a profound impact on their health outcomes. A well structured and supported volunteer program can effectively decrease some of these barriers by increasing refugees' confidence and knowledge in using health services. Volunteers can also provide advocacy and improved communication to enhance both health and social care for refugees.

*"Having someone there who'll be like, no, no, it's all good. Don't stress. We're right here with you."  
(Julie, volunteer)*



*"... and it was only because the volunteer called me and she said, 'The father, he's trying to get in touch with me because they've got no food.'  
(Hugh, staff)*

*"Well, it was just filling a gap for our clients who needed support in getting to important appointments. So without this option, it just meant that clients would not be able to make appointments and that would be detrimental to their health."  
(Darren, staff)*

*"...so there's been times when I've been a lot more busy with my studies and needed to not volunteer and they were very accommodating of that, ..."  
(Rebecca, volunteer)*

*"The most successful part is actually not only the therapy, but also the way these volunteers were treating me, and I really consider that part of the therapy."  
(Mohamed, client)*

## REFERENCES

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• names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.