

## I came to Australia with my four siblings and my baby daughter.

Before coming to Australia we were living in a refugee camp. My mother died and my father was killed when I was about 16 years old. Life was very hard, we had no house, no food. I knew I needed to get help to find a better a life for my family. We were very lucky to get visas to come to Australia.

I found out about this citizenship project from my case worker in the Refugee Minor Program. I was very happy. Citizenship means freedom and security. Freedom to travel. We won't get stuck in another country. It also means we can vote in Australia. This is very important to me and my family.

My family and I met with VLA in August. We filled in some forms and have been waiting for our Freedom of Information documents to be released. They have now been received so we can move to the next stage of our application. I am very happy. I know my application will be done properly and this is very good.

**Mary (not her real name)**



# The Youth Citizenship in the West Project

## About the project

Getting citizenship is an important milestone for many new migrants. For people with refugee backgrounds it can be an important step that completes the settlement journey and can contribute to a sense of safety, belonging and wellbeing.

We know refugees can face significant systemic barriers and inequalities in applying for and obtaining citizenship that disadvantage people holding a refugee or humanitarian visa. The Youth Citizenship in the West Project emerged from an acute awareness of this unmet legal need in Melbourne's west.

The project focused on early intervention to assist young people from culturally diverse communities (and their families) in the western suburbs of Melbourne to apply for citizenship. Victoria Legal Aid received funding from the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner for one full-time senior lawyer and one project co-ordinator to pilot the project in collaboration with WEstjustice.

We would like to sincerely thank our project funder, the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner, and key project partner, WEstjustice.

## What we did

With the identified objective of seeking to provide preventive support to refugee clients in the application process for citizenship, the project delivery focused on:

- **Legal outreach** to young people in the western suburbs via schools and community settings, including through WEstjustice's school lawyer program
- **Legal assistance** in relation to citizenship applications, to help prevent visa cancellation and to prevent delays and stressful processes, and
- **Legal education** to increase understanding, capacity, and resources across community legal centres and settlement services as well as clarifying referral pathways for legal assistance.

A range of organisations across Wyndham, Melton and Brimbank Local Government Areas assisted the project, providing insights and referrals to enable the project to reach clients in the target group.



**Legal assistance** provided to almost **400 clients**



**Community legal education and project promotion events** delivered to more than **450 people**



**Professional legal education** delivered to over **100 project partner lawyers, settlement, and community workers**

## What we learned

Key lessons learned through the project include:

- **The value of a flexible learning approach.**  
This enabled an adaptable and tailored focus to designing resources, working with partners and delivering the pilot project. Building in reflection sessions and maintaining flexibility ensured that the project achieved key results.
- **Better understanding of barriers to citizenship.**  
The experience of engaging communities and working with clients has provided critical insights into the barriers to citizenship and the challenges faced by clients, as well as the services that have been supporting them.

- **Reinforced importance of partnerships and local engagement.**

This was critical for the provision of relevant support for clients, as well as to share information and knowledge with the broader community and local organisations. These partnerships also added vital insights on the value of citizenship and the important role it can play in refugees' recovery and settlement processes.

- **Having a clearly articulated vision.**

Because of the unmet demand for citizenship legal services, the project team recognised the importance of developing a clear vision to guide the service design and delivery, which included working towards permanent availability of services; offering a diverse range of legal and non-legal support; capacity building; developing a strong network of stakeholders; and the need for systemic change in the citizenship acquisition process for people from refugee backgrounds.

## Recommendations

The project evaluation demonstrated the project met and, in some areas, exceeded expectations, and that there is a clear need to continue the project and expand its remit.

The following recommendations are made in the context of strong local organisational support, and clear current and pre-existing demand for these services, for steps to be taken to:

1. Secure further funding to scale up the project and potentially roll-out the model in other locations.
2. Consolidate strategies to reach people facing the greatest barriers to accessing services.
3. Consolidate and expand the capacity and knowledge of staff from partner organisations.
4. Ensure a collaborative, reflective focus continues to be central to project design and delivery.
5. Undertake more research and data collection regarding citizenship benefits and barriers.

For more information or a copy of the full evaluation please email [citizenship@vla.vic.gov.au](mailto:citizenship@vla.vic.gov.au)

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**WEstjustice**

Victorian Legal Services  
**BOARD + COMMISSIONER**