

# Operation Safe Haven—disaster recovery management with the Kosovar refugees at Leeuwin Barracks, Western Australia

## Introduction

In 1999 the war in Kosova resulted in many civilians fleeing and being placed in refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania. The pressure placed on these camps led the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to take the unprecedented step of relocating the displaced persons around the world. Australia was of these countries to which refugees were sent.

Australia agreed to accept 4,000 refugees and accommodate them in Safe Havens across the nation. On 27 May 1999, Leeuwin Army Barracks in Western Australia received 384 Kosovar men, women and children.

The group represented a diverse amalgam of people in terms of religion, beliefs, values, attitudes and experiences. Many of the refugees had experience of the practice referred to as 'ethnic cleansing'. Some had witnessed the murder, torture and rape of family, friends and community members. They were denied the rights of their homeland and watched the burning and destruction of their villages and communities. They were forced to flee their homes and relocate to foreign countries. In some instances people were separated and isolated from family and community members.

To accommodate the Kosova people in Western Australia, the Leeuwin Barracks Safe Haven was established with the Australian Defence Force and Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) as lead agencies. Other agencies included the Western Australian Police Service, Hospital and Allied Health Services, Association for Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors (ASeTTS), West Coast College of Education, Red Cross and Salvation Army. The Department of Family and Children's Services (F&CS) was invited to participate as a result of its involvement in the state emergency management advisory committee.

The initial briefing provided by DIMA before the arrival of the Kosovars, set the scene for the department's role with the Kosova people in terms of recovery management. F&CS's main involvement was to assess the needs of the Kosovars

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and provide appropriate family and individual support, information, and advocacy.

## Recovery strategies

F&CS selected a multi-disciplinary team of professionals from diverse cultures and disciplines including clinical psychologists, social workers, education officers, children's services officers, community development officers and administrative staff to support the refugees.

Other selection criteria for team members included knowledge and experience in dealing with disaster recovery management and working in culturally diverse communities. Some staff were chosen for their language skills and experience in interpreting and translation services.

It was envisaged that the Kosovar people, most of whom had not met one another previously, would become a small, largely self governing community. It was also anticipated that this group of people would require services such as education, health, accommodation, counselling, transport, security, interpreters and recreation activities. Information provided at the briefing indicated that the Kosovars were of strict Muslim faith and followed rigid gender divisions.

The F&CS Team employed the broad principles of disaster recovery management and community development with particular sensitivity to cross cultural issues. The aim of community development is to empower a particular community or group of communities, and therefore the individuals within it, to address their needs. It involves a focus on issues such as access, equity and participation, and as such, has particular

relevance for marginalised groups and individuals within the wider community. (McGorry 1995).

In line with procedures outlined by the Australian Emergency Manual—Disaster Recovery (1996) and community development literature, staff began the process of assessing the needs of the community by forming and developing relationships and gaining acceptance and trust<sup>1</sup>. A literature review was undertaken focussing on Albanian history and culture, models of community development and models of practice in working with survivors of torture and trauma. Demographic information of the Kosova people was obtained from DIMA and Defence.

Staff conducted a cross sectional needs analysis to ascertain the Kosova people's requirements while living within the Leeuwin Barracks Safe Haven. The needs analysis was conducted by dividing the team into pairs each focussing on key groups of Kosovar people. The key groups were identified as being the zero to six-year-old children, young people aged 12 to 25, parents of young children and the elderly. The needs analysis was conducted via consultation and observation. It examined the areas of education, recreation, safety, health, and emotional/psychological wellbeing.

The needs analysis illustrated that the Leeuwin refugees represented a cross section of the Kosova population and were by no means a homogenous group. It further demonstrated the diverse characteristics of the community in terms of their varying levels of education, social, economic and religious backgrounds. There was also a distinct rural-urban dichotomy.

## Other findings of the initial assessment (analysis):

- it was apparent that there were no appropriate facilities or structured activities for children under the age of

## Notes

1. This was conducted via informal and formal meetings in familiar surroundings within the Leeuwin Safe Haven.

- seven years
- many adults indicated a strong desire to improve their English speaking skills but some were limited in attending classes due to lack of childcare
- the young women expressed a desire to have access to their own meeting area
- the men in the community requested participation in activities to support their traditional roles.

These findings showed that staff needed to overcome cultural and language differences so that they could work effectively with the people. Staff were also required to work collaboratively with the other agencies involved. This required participation in regular morning briefings at which critical information was disseminated, agency roles clarified, tasks and activities negotiated, and a fortnightly calendar of events endorsed. This forum then linked into regular meetings attended by DIMA and Defence with the Kosovar's own elected management council.

As a result of the needs analysis, and Lead Agency support, F&CS undertook to provide the following services:

- early education—providing a safe environment in which children aged four to seven years could have educational input and give parents time out for their own needs including attending English classes
- advocacy and support
- recreational and social activities
- counselling—one to one informal basic counselling and psychological therapy related to child behaviour management and post trauma support
- child protection.

These services were provided via consultation and involvement of community members (for example, consulting parents and the elected Kosova Council) thereby empowering and enabling the Kosovars to make their own informed decisions. This approach is consistent with the process suggested by Papadopoulos (1999). Papadopoulos emphasises the importance of 'therapeutic presence' instead of imposing formal psychotherapy, and is characterised by an avoidance of psychologising the evil nature of war atrocities and pathologising political dimensions.

To support staff<sup>2</sup>, debriefings were

provided on a daily and weekly basis. These sessions involved peer support such as sharing information, experiences and events which occurred during the day, and planning for the next day's activities and events.

Formal weekly debriefings were also conducted by a Senior Clinical Psychologist from the F&CS and involved providing information on appropriate self care, self monitoring for level of distress and signs of vicarious trauma. The nature of the debriefs was informal, flexible and sensitive to the team's issues and concerns and often involved an interweaving of personal and procedural issues.

## Results

### Early education

There were a number of positive outcomes and achievements in the area of early education including:

- acquisition of appropriate infrastructure and resources to run an early education service
- delivery of two modified education programs sensitive to the children's level of development, linguistic abilities and psychological health
- regular attendance of 16 to 23 children in the kindergarten (4 and 5 year olds) and 16 (6 year olds) in the preschool
- parents were given the option of leaving children in a supervised education environment while they attended adult English classes
- parents commented on their children's enjoyment in attending and the benefits to the whole family when the children were occupied in a positive way
- children's development improved such as their ability to share and interact with others, gross and fine motor skills, communication skills, increased attention and concentration span
- flow on effect of children's learning to other family members, especially language skills
- parents were able to seek advice on child management issues and staff were able to provide positive role models in parenting.

### Advocacy and support

The Family and Children's Services team provided extensive advocacy and support services to the Kosovars and personnel from other agencies. This included:

- raising of Kosovar issues and concerns to appropriate agencies and engaging them in services to best assist them in having these needs met and issues addressed

- appropriate referral of people to relevant agencies
- follow up with Kosovars and agencies to check on adequacy of service provision
- acquisition of resources for staff and the Kosova people
- effective and open communication to ensure the community understood the role of Family and Children's Services (done via the daily Safe Haven bulletin, in both English and Albanian, and distribution of notices to relevant Kosova groups).

### Recreational and social activities

Family and Children's Services was involved in planning, organising and implementing recreational and social activities. Staff actively participated in the majority of events. This involved:

- provision of informal and non threatening settings in which the Kosova people felt comfortable to disclose and discuss their experiences
- recognition of existing skills of the young people and assisting them to develop new skills
- increase in the cohesiveness of the group of Kosova people through participation in events organised by both the community and agencies
- breakdown of formal barriers which existed between agencies and between the agencies and Kosovars
- help in containing post trauma symptoms
- provision of opportunities to support parents in appropriate and positive interactions with their children
- recognition, invitation and involvement with the Kosovars in significant celebrations such as the Kosova Flag Day celebrations and the double wedding.

### Counselling

Counselling comprised a major part of the work done by Family and Children's Services and included:

- provision of informal counselling to the majority of the Kosova people; initially this comprised active listening, summarising and reflection while subsequent discussions involved on-going active listening
- reinforcement and modelling of positive and preventive parenting, appropriate anger management, valuing of individual's characteristics, current status and circumstances
- promotion and assistance in developing assertiveness and positive self esteem skills in children, young people and parents
- creation of an environment which reinforced appropriate communi-

## Notes

2. This is consistent with the theories and models of the management of staff engaged in emergency/disaster recovery.

cation and interactions between the children

- incidental learning particularly within the early education forum.

### Child protection

Child protection is a statutory responsibility of the department and as such was an important component of the F&CS intervention.

By remaining sensitive to cultural issues of the Kosova people, the F&CS effectively assessed and intervened on several child protection matters. These issues were all resolved in a culturally appropriate manner. The Department also ensured the safety of the community, particularly the children, via discussion with lead agencies about appropriate child safety procedures, and the development of rules and routines.

### Summary

Recovery management at the Leeuwin Safe Haven can be conceived as being more on an interim basis.

That is it was envisaged that victim recovery would take considerable time due to the nature of infrastructure damage, psychological damage, disruptions to services, shortages of essential items (ie. food, water etc), ongoing fear and distrust. Sadly some people may never recover from the trauma of their experiences. For many victims of the war, recovery will take some time as they set about re-establishing themselves in Kosova.

F&CS work at Leeuwin Barracks has been unique in that the department was one of two state government agencies invited to provide services.

Whilst at the Barracks the refugees were provided with recovery strategies, information and interventions to assist them in expediting their recovery upon the return to their homeland. Working with refugees was complex and required creative strategies. The primary objective of the Department's involvement was to provide family and individual support to the Kosova people. In meeting this objective, the team assessed the current needs of the people and provided services appropriate to these needs.

The work undertaken by the team was mindful of community recovery and development models; cross cultural models and issues of sensitivity; client empowerment, and the need to create a supportive and safe environment. The approach was activity based and consisted of programs which promoted resilience within the Kosovar people. Activities focused on recognising existing skills and

developing new skills. The approach was deliberately competency based as opposed to analysing deficits within the community.

The team benefited from not being expected to engage in the work of 'therapy' as this was provided by a contracted non government service (ASeTTS). Team members were free to encounter the Kosovar people as a 'therapeutic presence' rather than as clients with whom therapy was a service which had to be provided.

The generosity of the Western Australian community cannot be overlooked in the overwhelming offers of goods and services which clearly made a difference to the Kosovars quality of life.

The obvious barrier of language proved to be a vehicle for bringing staff and Kosovars together through a mutual need to understand one another and in particular the Kosovars eagerness to learn English.

While not formally assessed, the value of the activities undertaken by the Team has been acknowledged by the lead agencies in the operation, other state organisations, and by the Kosovars themselves. F&CS Disaster Management Team at Leeuwin measured it's success by the fact that the Kosovar parents entrusted their children into its care for activities on and off the Base. Ultimately the joint efforts of all service agencies did indeed create a Safe Haven where individuals could begin to come to terms with

their tragic circumstances and constructively prepare for the return to their homeland.

### References

Emergency Management Australia 1996, *Australian Emergency Manual: Disaster Recovery*, EMA, Canberra.

McGorry P. 1995, 'Working with survivors of torture and trauma: the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture in perspective', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 29, pp. 463-472.

Papadopoulos R. 1999, 'Working with Bosnia Medical Evacuees and their Families: Therapeutic Dilemmas', *Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp.107-120.

# ASEP Journal 2000

## Call for papers

The Journal of the American Society of Professional Emergency Planners has issued a call for papers for the 2000 edition. Papers are due July 31, 2000.

The Journal will be released in November at the annual conference of the International Association of Emergency Managers in Austin, Texas.

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## Spatial Data In Emergency Management workshop

This workshop was held in conjunction with the Australian Disasters Conference 1999 in Canberra.

The proceedings are now available on-line on the ACT Emergency Services Bureau's web site, at: [www.esb.act.gov.au/adc99/](http://www.esb.act.gov.au/adc99/)

Anyone involved with spatial data, GIS, decision support, risk management or field data collection and mapping should read this.