Long way home?
The plight of African refugees obtaining decent housing in Western Sydney.

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This project would not have been possible without the participation of the 31 African refugee men and women, settlement workers, and housing providers who were interviewed. We would especially like to say thank you to the African refugees who trusted the project team and welcomed them into their homes.

The motivation for this research project originated with settlement workers at ANGLICARE Sydney Migrant & Refugee Service who dedicate their time and creative energy to trying to resolve housing insecurity issues with African refugees. The project planning team included Rachael Gavarotto; John Bellamy; Cheryl Webster; Christine Ratnasingham; Arnjali Sabapathy; Victor Kollie; and Louisa McMillan.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Refugees are among the most socially excluded groups in Australia. They have been subjected to persecution, trauma or torture in their home country and have arrived in Australia with few or no possessions. Refugees face multiple barriers in accessing the means to re-settle in Australia. Difficulty in accessing affordable and decent housing is a particular challenge for recently arrived refugees. There has been a call for detailed research into the barriers that African refugees confront in searching for housing, and the degree to which existing practices and institutions assist refugee settlement (Foley & Beer 2003).

This research project was conducted by the ANGLICARE Sydney Social Policy & Research Unit (SP&RU) in partnership with ANGLICARE Sydney Migrant & Refugee Services (MARS). The formal research question engaged in the report is: Is the housing assistance given to African refugees sufficient to help them to secure decent medium to long term housing in Western Sydney? The project methodology involved structured interviews with key stakeholders including 21 African refugees living in Western Sydney, 6 settlement workers, 3 housing workers and 1 real estate agent. African community members were asked questions about their expectations and experience of accessing affordable housing. Settlement and housing workers were asked about the efficacy of existing assistance strategies designed to help African refugees secure housing. Data from these interviews was analysed with a focus on the discrepancy between expectations about what helps and the lived experience of obtaining housing.

Discussion in the report is interspersed with selected quotes from African community members, settlement workers and housing workers.

This report demonstrates that access to decent housing that is affordable and sustainable has not been achieved for many African community members in Western Sydney. The project findings suggest that ambitions for decent housing remain untenable due to a shortage of suitable public and private housing stock. Other barriers to African refugees securing housing evidenced in this study include: unaffordable housing, unsafe housing conditions, the housing system as a “maze” that locks African refugees out of opportunities, discrimination toward refugees and finally, the impact of refugee mental health when seeking housing.

“There are no houses like that in Sydney! I’ve never heard about housing that is affordable and good size for a family. Especially us Sudanese, we doubt you can get a house like that!”

This study also found evidence for a number of protective and enabling factors for housing recent African refugees. These include: having access to reliable financial options (including Rent start, Tenancy Guarantees and Centrepay), having safe and friendly relationships with neighbours, good practice by housing providers, and refugees exercising independence, strategy and self-advocacy.

In this study, participants were asked to comment on current and potential forms of housing assistance. Support was expressed for the following interventions: (1) developing alternative housing models; (2) extension of case-management services; 3) culturally safe practices; and (4) cross-cultural community education for real estate agents and landlords. A shift in expectations is also desired for
African refugees to develop ‘realistic’ expectations of public and social housing, and for the housing sector to demonstrate more inclusive practices toward African families.

Overall, this research found evidence for current housing assistance strategies benefiting African refugees. Access to reliable financial options and one on one case-management are two strategies that are clearly assisting recent refugees in their search for secure housing in Western Sydney. However, significant further interventions are needed in order to successfully house African refugees in decent and sustainable dwellings. In light of this, the report makes a number of recommendations.

**SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. An ongoing funding mechanism to increase the capacity of existing settlement programs to perform case-management and community education relevant to housing beyond the IHSS period.

2. Increase funding and development of the Telephone Interpreting Service (TIS), including the continuation of funding to train people (free of cost) to become accredited to translate in rare and emerging languages through TIS.

3. To increase the capacity of organisations funded through the Settlement Grants program (SGP) to deliver education workshops about housing for the private rental market sector and for refugee communities. Questions on private rental application forms about previous rental history to be amended to recognise recent arrivals under various programs.

4. The feasibility of DIAC providing project funding for a refugee-specific housing hub in Western Sydney to be investigated. Potential benefits of this service as identified in this study are: having bi-lingual and multi-lingual workers who are specialised in housing options, applications and processes; the provision of case-management in relation to housing; in addition to strengthening advocacy in the region.

5. Alternative housing models including head leasing by not-for-profit organisations should be extended. In this model, community organisations rent affordable properties on the private market and sublet these to newly-arrived humanitarian entrants or refugees at full or below market rent.

6. Housing NSW to further endorse and strengthen comprehensive models of practice when working with complex or at risk clients.

7. Further research to be conducted into the gendered aspects of African settlement including how to better meet the needs of single African women and how to increase the use of support services in Western Sydney by African men.
1. INTRODUCTION

Access to affordable and decent housing plays a critical role in the successful settlement of refugees in Australia. Unfortunately, housing insecurity related stories are pervasive in ANGLICARE Sydney’s work with African refugees who arrived as part of the Humanitarian Program. People in the Southern Sudanese and Small and Emerging Communities Programs, in particular, battle impediments in securing medium to long term housing. African refugees continue to struggle finding stable accommodation despite community education, bond and rental assistance, casework services and other forms of support in place to assist this population.

Securing affordable and stable housing is a challenge for many Australians, including the African refugee community. Most African refugees in Australia experience forms of social exclusion including: relying on social security payments as the source of income; unemployment or under-employment; low levels of English language skills; and poor mental health due to the effects of experiencing trauma and persecution in their home country. Before reaching Australia, many African refugees spent several years in refugee camps after fleeing their countries of origin (Atem & Wilson 2008).

In response to the continuing housing insecurity stress reported by African refugees who access ANGLICARE Sydney’s Migrant & Refugee Service (MARS), a research project was conducted by the Social Policy & Research Unit (SP&RU) in partnership with MARS. The project planning team designed the research to investigate the expectations and experience of African refugees’ in securing housing, and to evaluate the impact of housing assistance strategies in helping African refugees obtain medium to long term housing.

The formal research question asked in the study was: Is the housing assistance given to African refugees sufficient to help them to secure affordable and decent medium to long term housing in western Sydney?

To learn more about the housing pathways of African refugees in Western Sydney in their first 5 - 10 years of settlement, structured interviews were conducted with 21 African refugees, 6 settlement workers and 4 NSW Housing workers and real estate agents. The interview schedules were designed to ensure that participants could talk about housing experiences and make comment about current assistance strategies available to help African refugees obtain housing. To support recently arrived African participants meaningfully participate in interviews, translators were used when required.

This report critically engages with the assumption that providing African refugees with the skills and knowledge to access housing necessarily leads to their securing decent housing in Western Sydney. Despite the dedication of settlement workers and the courage of refugees in negotiating the ‘housing system maze’, our findings suggest that obtaining access to long-term housing that is affordable and large enough to accommodate African families has not been achieved. In the light of this, the report makes several recommendations about desirable stakeholder interventions that could be implemented for the purposes of helping African refugees’ secure decent housing in Western Sydney.

1 In this report the terms ‘African refugees’ or ‘community members’ are used when referring to refugees and Humanitarian program entrants re-settling in Australia. We recognize that refugees from the African continent come from different countries with different experiences of persecution or trauma.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Refugees and their settlement experience in Australia

According to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country…”

Australia is a major resettlement country for refugees. In 2008-2009 Australia accepted 13,500 onshore and offshore refugees according to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) Factsheet 67 (2010A). In Australia, a distinction is made between people who make application for protection who are lawfully or unlawfully staying in Australia (onshore claims), and refugee and special humanitarian program entrants (offshore resettlement claims). The offshore resettlement component comprises the majority of refugees in Australia, classified under two categories of permanent visa. These are:

(1) The Refugee category which includes the Refugee, In-country Special Humanitarian, Emergency Rescue and Woman at Risk sub-classes.

(2) Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) for people outside their home country who are subject to substantial discrimination amounting to gross violation of human rights in their home country. A proposer / sponsor who is an Australian citizen, permanent resident or eligible New Zealand citizen, or an organisation that is based in Australia, must support applications for entry under the SHP (DIAC 2009).

Recipients of particular visa categories receive more assistance than others. For example, Special Humanitarian Program entrants (SHP) who are ‘sponsored’ by a family member have some access to the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS), however are expected to have adequate support from their sponsor to access services. In contrast, those who are permitted under the Refugee Visa, including Women at risk category visa, receive additional settlement assistance in the form of 6 months case management and advocacy support through the IHSS. IHSS providers receive funding to provide people with assistance to find housing for up to 6 months following arrival in Australia. After the person has been in Australia for 12 months, they are no longer eligible for assistance under the IHSS funding (Fraser 2009).

The majority of African refugees now living in Australia arrived between 2000-2005 as part of the Federal government humanitarian program in response to political unrest and civil wars on the African continent (Atem & Wilson 2008). The majority of African refugees in Australia claim Sudanese ancestry. According to the 2006 census, there were 4,495 persons in the Sydney metropolitan area who claimed Sudanese ancestry. An overwhelming majority of this group (87.9%) were born overseas. At the time of the 2006 census, only 0.4% of this group, or 16 persons, were born in Australia and had Australian born parents (ABS 2009).

The housing needs of refugees in Australia

Before their arrival in Australia, most refugees have experienced poverty, low levels of formal education, have suffered from the effects of torture and trauma, and have little or no knowledge of English. Many have never rented a house, paid a bill, gone to work or had any concept of engaging with institutions
such as banks, real estate agents or government departments (Refugee Council of Australia 2010; Jupp 1994). Refugees have arrived in Australia with little money and no or few possessions. Most rely on government assistance and live on very low incomes (Atem & Wilson 2008).

While it is clear that refugees have faced multiple challenges before arriving in Australia, this should not distract attention from the impact of social exclusion refugees often experience following their arrival in Australia. Harrell-Bond (1999, in Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2003) argues that securing stable housing and employment opportunities may be more therapeutic than western-style therapeutic intervention, and cites insecure housing as one of the most significant predictors of mental health problems among refugees. If this is the case, the main emphasis of resettlement assistance should be on increasing refugees’ ability to participate in the economic and social structures of Australian life. Obtaining secure housing is vital to participation.

Limited research is available into the housing pathways for African refugees in Australia. Of the research done to date, it has been found that the lack of capacity to afford decent housing is compounded by a shortage of suitable housing for African families (Atem & Wilson 2008). The size of African refugee families is an obstacle to securing appropriate housing, and African refugee families can group together in inadequate small dwellings in order to access affordable housing. Further, gaining access to private rental accommodation is hampered by discrimination of landlords and their agents (ASHRA 2007; Campbell 1997). Anecdotal evidence suggests that limited housing stock and poor housing design in Australia has grave implications for the cohesion of African families and communities, leading to a loss of cultural connection and other problems.

“Successful” housing of refugees?

Successful housing of refugees can be conceptualised in several ways. At a basic level, housing is a physical structure that provides shelter. Beyond this basic shelter, it is important to distinguish other minimum standards of appropriate housing. These include: the adequacy, including the physical quality of the dwelling; the suitability or appropriateness of the dwelling for accommodating the size and type of household living in it; and the affordability measured by the proportion of the household’s financial resources spent on the shelter (Murdie 2008).

Additionally, a conception of appropriate and sustainable housing for refugees should include access to formal and informal supports. Accessing support is especially important for refugees who have been displaced from their homeland and are settling in a strange, new culture with different social norms.

What forms of “housing assistance” do African refugees currently receive in Western Sydney?

There have been a number of initiatives designed to help African refugees settle in recent years. Following exit from the IHSS, some housing assistance is available to African refugees through settlement programs. Workers in settlement programs in Western Sydney provide: information, skills development, community development, referral and advocacy, capacity building and casework services. Workers in settlement programs have reported that they are struggling to meet the need for support among refugees, including the provision of housing assistance. Part of the problem is that refugees are eligible to receive intensive help to find their first house in Australia, but do not have the skills to find another if their lease ends or is ended 12 months following arrival when they are no longer eligible for support through the IHSS (Fraser 2009).
Housing NSW offers various services or ‘products’ to applicants: Private Rental Brokerage; Tenancy Facilitation; Tenancy Guarantee; Bond Assistance; Rent Start Assistance; and community social housing. Community housing organisations provide limited affordable rental housing to people on low to moderate incomes. Organisations include: Affordable Community Housing Ltd; Argyle Community Housing Ltd; Community Housing Ltd; Ecclesia Housing; Hume Community Housing Association; and St George Community Housing Limited.

3. THE RESEARCH PROCESS

3.1 Research questions

This research project was undertaken to identify and develop service approaches likely to be successful in assisting African refugees to access housing in Western Sydney. To identify helpful strategies, inquiry was undertaken into barriers and enabling factors on the way to securing housing in the first 5 - 10 years of settlement. The research aimed to make recommendations for policy development in government and non-government services that will better meet the housing needs of Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) entrants from Africa.

The formal research question addressed in this report is:

Is the housing assistance given to African refugees sufficient to help them secure affordable and decent medium to long term housing in western Sydney?

Further questions include:

What are the housing pathways for African refugees exiting the IHSS program who are settling in western Sydney?

What are African refugees’ understanding and perception of their housing needs?

What are the barriers and obstacles to assisting African refugees obtain affordable housing?

What protective or enabling factors help to secure affordable and decent housing?

3.2 Methodology

This project utilised survey tools that were administered via structured face to face interviews with the two sample populations; the African refugee sample and the housing and community / settlement workers sample. A structured interview approach was considered appropriate in order to promote standardisation in the asking questions and recording of answers. This approach to research is justified when there are multiple members in a research team who are collecting data, as was the case in this project. A further strength of employing structured interviews was conducting enquiry in a more standardised fashion about desirable housing assistance strategies.

Structured interviewing is generally recognised as a quantitative approach to doing social research. However it is fair to observe this project featured qualitative elements including probing; inviting participants to develop their responses to scheduled questions, in addition to asking open questions as a means of excavating depth responses about refugee housing and homelessness experiences. When analysing the transcript data, this methodological combination was addressed through conducting thematic coding of responses in addition to quantitative aggregation of results when relevant.

The survey questions were developed by the project planning team. Members of the team who work in ANGLICARE Sydney Migrant and Refugee Service (MARS) were instrumental in providing advice in the development of the questions. Relevant literature also informed the question development. Settlement workers provided advice to the SP&RU on how to access relevant stakeholders in the field and culturally appropriate ways of engaging members of African refugee communities.
3.3 Description of participants

Participants in this study comprise a purposive sample of stakeholders involved with housing African refugees in Western Sydney. Participants were drawn from three sample populations: first, African refugees who have exited the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) program; second, settlement workers who provide casework services to African refugees; and third, Housing NSW workers and real estate agents. The rationale for sampling from these three populations was to achieve comparative or contrasting experiences.

A total of 21 African refugees volunteered to participate in the research. These community members were recruited through ANGLICARE Sydney MARS team, and via snowball sampling methods, in late 2009/early 2010. Five community members were male and 16 were female. Table 3.3 below provides details of African community member’s country of origin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Total = 21</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Central and West Africa</td>
<td>1 Congolese; 1 Liberian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Southern and East Africa</td>
<td>1 Burundian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3 Community member participants’ country of origin

Community members had arrived in Australia during the period 2002-2008 under the visa categories of Special Humanitarian program (n=9) or Refugee (n=12). One Refugee Visa participant entered under the Woman at risk category. All participants had received varying levels of support through the IHSS.

In the second sample 6 settlement workers were recruited from three different not for profit agencies. These workers have considerable experience in providing settlement assistance to African refugees.

Additionally, four people working in government housing and commercial real estate sectors were also recruited. Of these, 3 worked in Housing NSW (HNSW) and 1 in real estate. There was difficulty in recruiting participants from these sectors due to disinterest and communication difficulties. Ideally, more participants from these sectors would have been recruited to the project as a means of “getting inside the heads of the people who can actually help” (settlement worker). The capacity of this research to examine the relationship between African refugees and housing workers was limited by the small number of housing workers recruited to the project.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Professional role</th>
<th>Cultural background</th>
<th>Total = 10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refugee settlement worker</td>
<td>Sudanese (n=4)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kenyan (n=1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anglo-Australian (n=1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing NSW worker</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian (n=3)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Estate agent</td>
<td>Croatian-Australian (n=1)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4 Settlement workers and housing workers samples description

In total 31 people participated in the research.
3.4 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Interviews with members of the African refugee community were undertaken by interviewers who had received some training, some of whom are bi-lingual or multi-lingual workers. The SP&RU coordinated the training for interviewers and note-takers early in 2010. Interviewers were provided with the survey tool and given practical advice about administering the survey via interviews. Discussion also took place about culturally inclusive interviewing and risk management.

The majority of interviews took place in refugee community services or other places of work. Three interviews were conducted in African community member’s homes. Interviews ranged from between 45 minutes and 120 minutes. It is fair to say that much effort was put into meaningfully engaging African community members during interviews. Questions were often rephrased and interviewers dedicated time to reflecting back participants responses to gauge if they had properly understood. Eight interviews were conducted in Dinka. With the permission of participants, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Initially data was coded according to the categories implicit in the survey tools. In this first round of analysis data was selected and organised under the categories (1) pathways to housing, (2) difficulties & barriers to refugees securing housing and (3) recommendations/ enabling factors in African refugees securing housing. In a second round of analysis, practices and trends within these categories were observed. Factors which appeared to inhibit access to decent and affordable housing were identified. Conversely, practices that appear to enable better housing experiences were identified. Salient needs of African refugees were also observed. In this report these practices and trends are organised into 3 core categories: Barriers and Obstacles to securing housing; Protective Factors on the way to housing; and Needed Interventions. Each category contains relevant findings interspersed with discussion. To communicate the frequency or extent of certain beliefs or experiences [non-validated scales were used in interviews across both samples] the discussion contains simple quantification of results. To promote clearer understanding in the report, several quotes were edited to remove syntax errors and repetition. Care was taken not to distort what participants said.

3.5 Ethical considerations

A number of strategies were implemented in the project to safeguard the protection of participants. Information sheets were developed for each sample population clearly explaining the purpose of the project and the nature / extent of participant involvement. Interviewers took the time to go through these sheets with all African community members. Participants’ consent to be involved was recorded via audio methods. Confidentiality of participants is protected in the report through using descriptive tags with quotes (eg. Community member #3) and no real names are used.

In this study we recognise that participants have different “stakes” in the problem of securing housing for African refugees. In writing this report every attempt was made to fairly address the thoughts and experiences of different stakeholders.
4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The project findings are organised into three sections. Barriers and Obstacles to securing housing describes hindrances that prevented African refugees obtain housing or participate in the Australian way of life. The second section, Protective & Enabling Factors, describes successful assistance strategies and stories of resilience on the way to securing housing. The final section, Needed Interventions distils stakeholders’ views about promising current and potential housing interventions. Discussion in each section is interspersed with selected quotes from community members, caseworkers and housing workers in addition to aggregation of results obtained from scales.

4.1 Barriers and obstacles to securing housing

African community members experienced disempowerment in their attempts to secure housing. This was commonly attributed to a lack of suitable housing, housing insecurity involving frequent moving, and difficulties communicating with the housing sector. Decisions about where to move were perceived as outside of the individual refugees’ control. Some (n=13) respondents said they were “forced” to live in overcrowded and unsatisfactory conditions due to the lack of available housing.

4.1.1 Inadequate housing stock

The limited amount of available public and social housing for low income families means that refugees and new arrivals are forced to compete for homes in the private rental market. In this context the affordability of private rental housing has declined in the last 12 years, particularly for those households on low or fixed incomes (FaHCSIA 2009).

The problem of inadequate supply of both public and private rental housing was described in various ways across the samples. African community members described the problem in terms of overcrowding, expense and their need to move on from inappropriate dwellings frequently. Settlement workers and housing workers described the problem in terms of inadequate housing stock; the lack of dwellings suitable for bigger families and the lack of affordable housing. Currently, Housing NSW has limited larger dwellings due to the policy of predominantly constructing smaller one-bedroom and two-bedroom dwellings to ensure the maximum number of dwellings per development (Housing NSW 2009). The maximum number of people (including children) allocated to each room by Housing NSW is 2 (personal correspondence, Housing NSW worker). ‘Severe overcrowding’ is recognised by Housing NSW when: an adult or couple share a bedroom with a child over 3 years of age; more than three children share a bedroom; and more than two unrelated adults share a bedroom (personal correspondence). Housing NSW workers acknowledged the dearth of suitable housing stock available in the following ways:

“We need more housing [stock]. This is not only a problem for Africans. The Afghan families are having the same issues. They’ve got big families. They’ve got nowhere to sleep. Everyone’s just sort of packed in cheek to jowl. And it’s stupid…”
Our own stock of accommodation to suit families is very minimal” (HNSW worker #1).

“People come to Housing [NSW] and assume that we are going to be able to assist them. There’s no backup plan. People have this expectation that we can sort out all the issues. Unfortunately, we don’t have the resources to do that. [More] effort needs to go into educating the agents to get more big properties, 4 bedroom, 5 bedroom properties” (HNSW worker #3).

“The rental market in Sydney is just boiling over. The demand around Auburn and Granville is so high. No matter what price you put on a property, someone will rent it. You could [get] a cardboard box, wrap a bit of tin around it, call it a house and charge two hundred bucks a week –someone will rent it, you know?” (HNSW worker #2)

Settlement workers said the majority of African community members who access their services cannot secure affordable and suitable housing. These workers spoke about the lack of houses in the market as being a problem:

“Every client that we see has a housing problem! I’ve seen over 392 clients and I guarantee you, more than 80% of them have [housing problems]… It can take two months to find a place…they have to move out further to Campbelltown to get a place… More than half of them, they’re getting evicted for not being able to pay the rent and if they complain too much about things being broken or damaged, [they] find themselves evicted!” (Settlement worker #6)

“Family size is a big determinant. We’ve had families, one particular family; they’ve lodged up to 32 applications and have been rejected from a real estate agent. The agent told me they had a good rental history and everything but they couldn’t approve the applications because of the number of kids… no houses” (Settlement worker #2)

Most of the African community members interviewed had moved frequently since their arrival in Australia.

One person had lived in eight different places. The remainder had lived in 3-5 different places (on average) and there was an observable trend of moving every 6-12 months. It is clear that African refugees have very limited choice about dwelling type and where it is located. One community member now living in public housing said: “my application was accepted in May 2009. They called me and gave me one option, and if I don’t like, then you wait. I don’t like it, [however] I didn’t have an option.” Due to their desperation some families accept housing far away from the school where their children attend, “it’s really difficult for their kids, they don’t have a car.” (Settlement worker # 2)

The impact of knowing there is a lack of housing available, both now and into the future, should not be underestimated. Some community members communicated ‘stuckness’ and find it difficult to plan for the future. A woman who was homeless at the time of her interview said: “I’m staying in a friend’s place for one month, and then I go back living in a granny flat, in my friend’s house…so not very secure”. A number of community members with children expressed fear about what would happen when their children move on due to the reduced income. Due to the lack of housing available, another woman was forced to stay in a unit despite it recently being set on fire by neighbours. She said:

“I went to the real estate and I couldn’t find a house. The houses are too expensive. I decided to stay there. If I die, I die there with my kids, if another fire incident happens.”

This woman’s feeling of desperation about the lack of housing available was further indicated when she said:

“if that [fire] happened again, and if I die, the Australian government will see what trouble I was in….I present my case twice to the Department of Housing they didn’t do anything. I went to the real estate and I couldn’t find a house. The houses are too expensive and they don’t give us a house!” (Community member #2)
4.1.2 Unaffordable housing

Most refugee participants interviewed have been paying more rent than what is affordable (19 refugees agreed with this statement). Some families have been evicted due to rental increases. One African woman interviewed had approached Centrelink for financial assistance due to the predicament of having only $20.00 each week after paying for basic expenses. She received little help and at the time of interview had chosen to terminate her lease and become homeless in order to avoid the cycle of debt. Other typical comments made about difficulties meeting the costs of housing and living included:

“Housing issues is always a problem because for us because we are not employed and we don’t have the money. We came to Australia with nothing at all. Nothing – no money, no education, no language. And when he go to the real estate looking for a house to rent it is difficult….. and, I don’t know how we going to survive” (Community member #19).

“We have no choice. You can do two things. Pay the money and live without food with little money, or move out. Other people, they moved out and they are on the street, they are homeless. Because the thing is they pay all the money for rent, the kids won’t get anything to buy food or something like that so they decided to move out.” (Community member #2)

The majority of community members relied on Centrelink payments as their source of income. This sometimes posed a dilemma when there are a number of family members in receipt of payments. If the family’s combined Centrelink income is too high they become ineligible to apply for social or public housing and other Housing NSW products. Settlement workers described this dilemma:

“The real estate agent tells them all the time ‘your income is low so you cannot rent the property’. And when they go to the Department of Housing, they tell them ‘you’ve got high income, you won’t be able to rent the property’.” (Settlement worker #4)

“Most people already have an application with Department of Housing. The thing is with a lot of our families they are in crisis because they have a lot of children. Their Centrelink income is too high to allow them to get social housing.” (Settlement worker #1)

4.1.3 Unsatisfactory and unsafe housing conditions

Community members were asked to comment on how secure they feel in their tenancy. Two people responded to this question by talking about the lack of safety they feel living in their home due to the property being damaged to the extent they cannot lock doors. Further, threats of violence to property, or to oneself, had been experienced by five community members. One woman explained:

“I live in apartment, and I’m really scared about the area. Cause in 2004, my husband was attacked by five people when he was coming from work. Another time in 2009, someone broke in the house through the window at night when we were sleeping.” (Community member #15)

Several people reside in poorly maintained rental properties. Fourteen people either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” they have waited a long time for repairs to be done, and some times repairs are not done. One woman said, “The place what I’m in is not safe. The security door is not proper. The carpet on the ground is not good for [my] kid.” (Community member #18) Settlement workers also described unsatisfactory conditions that refugee families live in:

“Sometimes they might live in old, fibro house, where it gets cold in winter or extremely hot in summer… and they concern about their health implication, and health. That why they have to move. So maybe the rent has increased, and the house is really old, and they think that they shouldn’t pay this money for a house like that.” (Settlement worker #03)

“[they] live in condemned houses, and they can’t move out because they can’t afford to. I would
say the real estate agents find difficult to rent to these houses to other people, and so rent them to refugees.” (Settlement worker #5)

The practice of leasing derelict properties to African refugees perhaps to take advantage of them had not gone unnoticed by community members. One respondent observed:

“You come here; you will be given a house which is cockroach all the time inside. And when you stay there for one year, they [landlord] say, ‘you broken this’, but you [know] it was already like that. So sometime we feel discriminated. We feel we are not part of Australia…” (Community member #16)

4.1.4 The “maze” of the housing system

Human services literature has long brought attention to the challenges people face when negotiating the service mazes of health, welfare, education, and housing. Our interviews with African community members suggest some of them have developed some familiarity with negotiating the housing “maze”, in the sense that they know who to contact when they have difficulties. Several community members have demonstrated skills in self-advocacy. However, the pathways through the public and private rental housing systems are not always visible and African refugees continue to be locked out of opportunities. This is particular problem in the private rental market when refugee families are forced to compete with people who have a better understanding of the process of obtaining housing along with references and a private rental history.

The rental housing system in NSW; comprising public/social housing administered by Housing NSW, community housing administered by community-based organisations, and private rental properties administered by real estate agents or landlords, is indeed a large, complex and often inhospitable sector. One Housing NSW worker (#1) discussed the specific challenges refugees face in negotiating public housing:

“Understanding how the government works, it can be daunting for people who are born here! The government, the red tape, the forms; their lack of understanding of how the government works is very difficult. Also, another barrier is the lack of trust in the government. You know, they’ve been persecuted by their government, the government they see is corrupt… we try to work with them to overcome that barrier.” (HNSW worker #1)

Another Housing NSW worker bought attention to the problem of refugees not understanding their legal obligations once they have rented a house, making comment that refugees can be “a little bit blasé about things like appointment times, the importance of paying rent on time, financial budgeting… cleanliness” (#3). Demonstrating the ability to do these things is pivotal in keeping a roof over one’s head. If a tenant moves on from a property and their rent is in arrears, or if they have lost all their bond money due to the state of the house and no attempt has been made to pay for repairs, the tenant becomes “blacklisted” and is blocked from renting other properties:

“I’ve got a tenant now who owes $3000 so I told him ‘you’re on that list until you pay and then you can get taken off!’ You’ve got to let them know beforehand, this is the story, if you don’t do this and this you get put on the blacklist.” (Real estate agent #1)

Settlement workers also said “not knowing how the system works in Australia” is a major barrier to refugees both securing and keeping housing. Prior to settling in Australia many African refugees have lived in camps where basic things are available. Learning how to manage one’s finances in a foreign country to pay for rent, bills, food, transport, and education is challenging, to say the least. Poor management of finances among African refugees was a problem acknowledged by settlement and housing workers. One settlement worker said that some African people don’t work enough at maintaining good relationships with their real estate agent:
“[to keep] the property take care of the property. And report any repairs immediately. Pay the rent on time. Because if you do these things the relationship with the real estate agent will be good and they will be willing to refer them for other properties.” (Settlement worker #5)

Having proficiency in English language skills in order to express oneself is a significant factor in successfully negotiating the housing system. Without an interpreter, Africans may face challenges in their dealings with the private rental market. One settlement worker commented:

“when they’re looking for houses… they can organise an interpretation service. Some of the real estate agents may not know about [this service], they don’t make use of it. Even if they know they don’t make use of it. It becomes very hard for clients because they can’t explain when there’s a problem in the house… they get a letter from the real estate agent and don’t know how to read it.” (Settlement worker #5)

4.1.5 Practices of discrimination

Discrimination is the practical expression of prejudice. “Prejudice” refers to beliefs and attitudes that rank some people as inferior to others. Acting on these prejudicial beliefs can produce discriminatory actions (Sidoti 2002). In this study explicit and implicit examples of discrimination were identified.

A few African community members said they have directly experienced racial discrimination while others said they were unsure if they are discriminated against because they have insufficient skills to “read” social situations. However, most community members had felt ignored when applying for housing with two people commenting some housing workers and real estate agents “don’t see” them.

Based on her experience helping refugees find housing, one worker commented, “Some agents don’t accept rental applications just because they are black”. Three respondents commented that real estate agents have misconceptions about refugees due to previous experiences with “bad” refugee tenants, with one woman saying:

“I think that real estates do not understand us and they don’t understand the culture… the way they took the words ‘refugee’, I think … the real estate have bad experience with them [other African refugee tenants] so they took that as everybody is like that. But see everybody’s different. We are not the same.” (Community member #3)

A systemic discriminatory practice is the exclusive use of English by real estate agents and housing providers when speaking to recently arrived Africans who have limited English language skills. One settlement worker (#1) explained how refugees’ poor language skills can lead to exploitation:

“They [African refugees] don’t understand what they’re supposed to do, they don’t understand what the real estate is supposed to do or their responsibilities due to language and their lack of education. Real estate also takes huge disadvantage of refugees because of lack of language, especially when they avoid making repairs to the properties.”

Other community members’ comments shed light on how language barriers do contribute to a lack of trust:

“Language barriers always brings misunderstanding and mistrust. ‘Cause if I say something, they won’t understand me, and if they say something to me I won’t understand them. That can create a barrier between agent and myself, and also I don’t trust them because what they saying, even though I understand it, I don’t think they, they are telling me the truth.” (Community member #4)

“I gave them [HNSW] the documents, hoping that they can help me, and they didn’t do anything. And that gave me lack of trust to people, not to give my information again. No help for myself, no help for other people in the community. So I don’t trust people again to give my information. I don’t know what are
they going to do with my information? Will it help me or help the community? I don’t know because I don’t trust people.” (Community member #2)

Housing NSW workers had mixed views about the efficacy of the free Telephone-Interpreting-Service (TIS). There was general acknowledgement of limited use of TIS by real estate and Housing workers. One Housing NSW worker was of the view that the TIS is not always a useful communication tool, saying:

“Communication between the interpreter and the client can be a bit of a stumbling block. I always thought it was dialect, but sometimes it’s hard to explain it to the interpreter, and then pass it on. I don’t know, you just feel like you’re not getting your message across….sometimes I’ve had to terminate a call and start again with a fresh interpreter because it just wasn’t getting anywhere.” (#1)

Another settlement worker suggested that improved communication between real estate agents and prospective tenants who are refugees wouldn’t necessarily help the situation, “Real estate don’t waste their time. They want someone whose language is money so they can rent the house!” (#6)

Entrenched in the private rental market housing application process are a number of expectations about the “good tenant”. The “good tenant” is someone with sufficient English language skills to complete an application, and who has a job and a good rental history. These assumptions are deemed reasonable in the private rental sector:

“At the end of the day, it’s, it’s not us who makes the decision who goes into the property, it’s the owners. For them it comes down to how much the tenant is earning, if they can afford the rent. The owners are worried about that and their rental history. Everybody deserves a first chance. But end of the day it’s an investment property and there’s a lot of money at stake…” (Real estate agent #1)

However, these ostensibly reasonable capitalist assumptions are clearly discriminatory when it comes to African refugees. Recently arrived Africans do not have a rental history and depend on Centrelink for their income. One community member shed light on this discrimination, saying:

“I think refugees and real estate [agents] don’t really mix. Because, this is your first time in Australia. They tell you: still you need rental and employment histories! If you have not lived in the country, how can you get these? As soon as you put your paper in without these, the same day they will reject your application.” (#11)

A settlement worker spoke about the need for African refugees to be aware of implicit and explicit forms of discrimination that occur in the private rental market. Knowing that large African families with young children can be discriminated against, this worker cautioned African parents to consider appearance management of their young family:

“They need to think about whether, do I bring my three children under five years old with me, and if I don’t what do I do with them? Or do I send my oldest child and how is that going to look to the real estate agent? In the market, as it’s so tight here, this is something that a renter would think about.” (#1)

Our findings suggest that prejudice about who is deserving of help is confined not only to the housing and real estate sectors. It is observable within the African community itself. While it was clear that single African mothers experience systemic discrimination, they also encounter gender-related prejudice in their own communities. Two participants who are single mothers described this prejudice:

“You feel like you have no dignity and people don’t actually pay attention for your problems, no body is there for you and you have to raise up your kids by yourself. When you are a single person, people have a lot of ideas about you, different ideas or negative ideas about you.” (Community member #2)
“Some communities might not be happy to help single mothers if they think the single mother has been a bad woman. They don’t say it to your face, but people judge you because of that. How come you don’t have a husband?” (Community member #10)

The stigma associated with being an African single-mother in Australia was further described:

“It’s really difficult to be a single parent. Back home in Sudan, there are a lot of things that can only be done by men, like hunting, getting food and all this stuff and building a house. There we build our own house, so there’s no real estate. If you don’t have a man in the house, you will be homeless with your kids and nobody cares about you or your children. So the life would be really difficult.” (Community member #2)

“If single parents are evicted there is no one to help them. They will become stressed, and have difficulty caring for the kids. This is not how the community functions back home where we are really supportive and connected to each other. But when we came to Australia, people lost their interest to help single parents because when a man go and help single parents, there will be a question mark. Why is that man going to help her? Do they have a relationship? Then the arguments will start, and maybe that’s how the family will break down.” (Settlement worker #15)

One woman explained the vulnerability that comes from being an African single woman in her community:

“When you are single it’s easy for men to come and trick you that they love you, they can get you pregnant and they say they will be there for you, and when you are pregnant, they disappear and you look for them and they get angry at you. ‘I don’t want to marry you or be with you’ they will say. This is because it is difficult for Sudanese community to remarry a woman or marry a woman who has been married before. So I think they treat us with no dignity at all.” (Settlement worker #15)

Discrimination and exclusion experienced by single African women are indicative of a greater fear that exists within Australian-African communities concerning changing patriarchal gender norms. Clear divisions of responsibility and honour attributed to men and women in their home country, are unsettled as African community members adapt to living in Australia. It has been observed elsewhere that life in Australia poses challenges to refugee men’s views of themselves as men. James (2010) argues that refugee men feel a deep sense of shame and failure when they cannot provide for their family, and report feeling undermined by women and children exercising their newfound rights. One community member described this predicament:

“Sometimes you can see the husband is suffering because the wife become the husband. The husband is confused, and the children have no respect for the parents. The father has no job. A lot of the African people have big problems.” (#20)

Dhanji (2010:123) observes that coming largely from patriarchal societies, single refugee women must overcome enormous challenges of literacy and adapting as breadwinners. These resilient women welcome the new roles, challenges and the space to be self-supportive that Australia offers them. On the other hand, hampered by the absence of supportive families, they continue to remain vulnerable.
4.1.6 Refugee mental health and the impact of the pre-migration experience

Prior to settling in Australia, many African refugees have experienced trauma and persecution. The experience of many years of displacement, emotional abuse, trauma and grief severely impacts on a refugee’s ability to settle, including obtaining and retaining adequate housing. The relationship between trauma experiences, refugee mental health and housing insecurity is complex and will not be discussed at any length in this report. Other research (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2003) demonstrates that while pre-migration experiences have a significant impact on psychological distress, post-migration stressors associated social exclusion add appreciably to post-traumatic stress symptoms.

A few of the African refugees interviewed said they know people who live with depression. Others have contemplated committing suicide. There was general acknowledgment that the unresolved stress of insecure housing, lack of employment opportunities and having no money does result in feelings of depression or mental illness. The following comments illustrate how the inability to control their housing future interweaves with stress and mental illness:

“you can end up being homeless, what come after this? You think something like committing a crime; you think you’re out of mind; you think of committing suicide.” (Community member #16)

“If you not settled, it is a confusion that you can go to stress and you go to depression, you get sick and you cannot do anything even for yourself.” (Community member #9)

“But we Sudanese got a lot of problem, like the renting problem, depression from the war. Suicide happen to a lot of Sudanese, if you count. They think they’re coming to a better country, but it’s not.” (Community member #13)

Perhaps most unsettling was the view expressed that committing suicide is a legitimate form of protest about inadequate conditions in Australia:

“African refugees want to make people aware of the problems they’ve been in, what they have faced before they came here, what they are actually facing in Australia. They throw themselves on the train tracks at the railway station and they are killed by the train. It’s because the hope they brought into the country and they didn’t find it. They went through suffering again, and they say ‘I came from the war and I came to Australia, I thought that my life would be completely different, and I’m facing a lot of different and difficult problems.’ So that’s why they go and commit suicide.” (Community member #2)

Settlement workers also explained how some refugees’ experience of depression and drug misuse deepens as they struggle to live a decent life in Australia. One said:

“The majority of them who have been homeless in Sydney have never been homeless before. That’s where they can develop stress and lead them to depression. They hurt themselves because they think that when they come to Australia, they won’t face these challenges. They don’t know how to deal with their stress or depression because they don’t understand counselling. They don’t know the benefit of counselling. But they think that it doesn’t help and don’t know why they should tell a stranger their problems. There’s a lack of trust, I think.” (Settlement worker #3)

These findings suggest that pre-settlement trauma exacerbates the challenges associated with re-settling in Australia.
4.2 Protective and enabling factors on the way to securing housing

When analysing the data for this report we attempted to recognise that the experience of housing insecurity among African refugees is not a fixed experience. Rather, the plights of African refugees securing decent housing in western Sydney is an emergent story that changes over time and according to which human agents are involved. In this project, stories of resilience and having small, however significant, successes in securing housing were heard.

This section discusses four protective or enabling factors on the way to African refugees securing housing. These are: having reliable financial options; safe and friendly relationships with neighbours; good practice among housing workers; and refugee’s exercising independence, strategy and self-advocacy.

4.2.1 Reliable financial options

Rent start is one ‘reliable’ financial option used by African refugees that is provided by Housing NSW. Rent start provides financial assistance to people starting or maintaining a tenancy in the private rental market. This Housing NSW strategy is one the four products included in their private rental assistance program. According to Housing NSW workers interviewed, most African refugees do obtain full or part payment toward rental bonds. Another assistance strategy accessed by African refugees is Centrepay. This is a free direct bill-paying service offered to customers receiving payments from Centrelink.

One settlement worker explained that the first step taken when African refugees look for housing is obtaining a full or part bond through Housing NSW. Once the tenancy is approved, they often elect for their rent to be automatically deducted from their Centrelink payment as a protective strategy to maintain their tenancy.

Private Rental Brokerage case-management is another Housing NSW service that helps African refugees:

“a Private Rental Brokerage Service Officer will be assigned to someone who has complex needs. The officer’s role is to assist them to find and sustain their tenancy. It involves the worker going out to visit the property, ensuring that the supports are still in place, keeping an eye on things, identifying any issues as soon as they come up rather than wait until the tenancies at risk. That service is really working very well.” (HNSW worker #1)

An additional financial option provided by Housing NSW that is designed to assist at risk populations secure housing is a Tenancy Guarantee. A Tenancy Guarantee involves Housing NSW providing assurance it will compensate a landlord up to $1,000 for unpaid rent or damage. One Housing worker explained how this product is used by some African refugees to secure long-term tenancies, who otherwise would be excluded from securing private rental properties: “Tenancy Guarantee is a major help and it does establish a tenancy. It is a provision there for the real estates to access (HNSW worker #3). This worker went on to explain that real estate agents have been encouraged to secure tenancies for more African refugees once they realise these leases have security in the long term.

Several settlement workers interviewed confirmed that these financial services are of benefit to assisting African refugees.
4.2.2 Safe and friendly relationships with neighbours

The degree to which African refugee respondents feel connected to their local community was largely attributed to the kind of relationships developed with neighbours. Five community members said that developing trusting relationships with neighbours made them “mostly happy” with their homes, despite these houses being too small and expensive. One African woman said, “we got a small place with four kids, so it's too small for us, but we don't want to leave our neighbours”. Having safe and friendly relationships with neighbours therein seems a protective factor with extending housing tenancies.

Also of interest was the finding that identifying neighbours as “friendly” traversed cultural differences; both community members and workers spoke of the importance of having friendly neighbours generally rather than African neighbours specifically:

“If the house has good people around, I can live with them. There are Sudanese, African, Lebanese, different people… we can see (African people) at church or on the weekends.” (Community member #9)

“Once I found that house I was more happy, secure and relaxed….. I need to add on that the neighbours are really friendly people. They say hello when I go to catch a bus, and that's made me feel really accepted, cause in my culture it's like when people say hello to you, you know that they're friendly and they like you to be their neighbour.” (Community member #4)

Several settlement workers said that African refugee families are more likely to settle in one area if they have good neighbours, making these comments:

“In Sudan, neighbours are like family members, who always support each other in different ways. They share their food; take care of each other's kids. Good neighbours are really important for the African community. That's why when they find a good neighbour; they find they will not want to leave that area.” (Settlement worker #3)

The variety of community member’s comments about neighbours revealed difficulties with befriending neighbours also. Similar to what Dhanji (2010) observed in his study with recent African refugees, several community members expressed alienation from the individualistic culture in Australian neighbourhoods. They felt depressed when they had no one to talk to.

The importance of developing trusting relationships with neighbours was described this way by one settlement worker, “a good relationship is life itself. Because most of people who came here have nothing to do with material wealth, it's all about this, human relationships.” (Settlement worker #6)

4.2.3 Good practice by housing providers

A further protective factor with increasing housing security for African refugees is good practice by housing workers and real estate agents. Good practice is defined here as: clear communication including the use of translators; making refugees aware of housing assistance services and products; and, active strategies to combat discrimination and racism. A few examples of good practice demonstrated by housing workers and real estate agents were described. All of the respondents agreed that increasing the cultural awareness of housing workers and real estate agents will help African refugees.

“Some [African refugees] are more comfortable being with, around people who accept them for who they are. However, most of my clients are really looking forward to integrate with the mainstream society.” (Settlement worker #2)
One way of demonstrating the significance of good practice among housing providers is to consider comments that suggest a deficit approach to working with refugees. The following quote speaks clearly to the problem of housing workers using a deficit approach:

“I believe that some of the housing providers have no knowledge about the refugee, where they’re coming from. I’ve had a case with a Housing NSW staff worker who asked me ‘I wonder why the government brings people like this client to Australia?’ I was shocked. First of all I thought, oh, she’s ignorant, but then I was like, maybe there’s limited resources to educate this person. This staff worker then asked me ‘before the African refugees come to Australia, don’t they go to the internet to check what Australia offers?’ I was really shocked. I believe some of them don’t know exactly what a refugee is.”
(Settlement worker #2)

The views expressed in this housing worker’s questions clearly demonstrate prejudice (“people like this”) and ignorance (“[in refugee camps] don’t they go to the internet to check out what Australia offers?”). Several community members interviewed who have been on the receiving end of prejudice expressed a desire for housing providers to be educated about the plight of African refugees.

Several examples of good practice by housing workers and real estate agents were described. A couple of respondents praised their real estate agents for their cultural sensitivity. One single mother said that having a real estate agent with a similar cultural background to her makes her feel understood and safe.

Two community members interviewed “loved” their real estate agents, for reasons why [a recent education campaign] is to understand clients and understand their particular needs, and teach our staff how to best deal with these issues. It’s not a one size fits all kind of approach. I’d like to think that Housing NSW is looking at a more holistic approach to solving client’s housing needs… it’s not about just finding them property, it’s about promoting the sustainability of accommodation as well.” (HNSW worker #1)

Working more ‘holistically’ with clients is a practice orientation to be applauded in Housing NSW. This issue is discussed in a later section.

4.2.4 Refugees demonstrating independence and skills in self-advocacy

Common to the plight of refugees in their early years of settlement is the experience of dependence. Due to arriving with little or no money and possessions, refugees are dependent on government services, human service agencies and/or their sponsor. However, of interest to our findings is that dependence on government and human service organisations didn’t necessarily promote further dependency. A number of African community members who have been entirely dependent on welfare have demonstrated resilience, a capacity to strategise for the future, and the ability to self-advocate.
One African community housing client (#20) who is a single mother has been threatened by her property owner on a number of occasions. The owner carries out un-scheduled property inspections, contrary to community housing policy. Recently the landlord said “You are destroying my house. If I find any other little things broken, I can’t lease it again. You will be out in the streets. I don’t like to get any reports. If I get another report, you must move”. In the face of these threats, the tenant continues to report any repairs required to the property as she wants to be a “good tenant”.

A few other women interviewed recounted situations where they have persisted with reporting ongoing maintenance problems, despite the risk of being labelled as a difficult tenant, or the fear of being evicted. These women persist with making reports because they are determined to fulfil their obligation to be a responsible tenant.

Several stories demonstrating courage and persistence in the face of barriers were heard in interviews. Despite not having money, or having poor access to transport, or juggling stressful and competing demands, a number of African community members persist with study. This is done in the hope of integrating well into Australian life, as expressed by one participant:

“To make the life here is not easy there is a lot of things you supposed to do study, know the way, know the culture for Australia, know this, know that, know lot of, a lot. So everyday you must do study, you are learning everyday, everything learning English, learning cooking, keeping house, learning machine, learning, learning you are learning, learning, learning everyday.”   (Community member #20)

Another woman explained that she developed the following strategy for enhancing opportunities for her children: staying in the one area, learning the language and building bridges with neighbours:

“African participants were asked if and how they assist others in their community with housing issues. Information sharing (n=6) and sharing space in their house with homeless community members (n=7) were the main ways of helping one another. The generosity demonstrated through welcoming another family into one’s (already overcrowded) home is remarkable. A few people who talked about sharing accommodation with other homeless families did so with some trepidation:

“When they accept someone to share their home, they try to help someone, but they’re still scared of Centrelink and real estate agents. They just kick them out. So someone help for three days and then go to another person. Do it for a shorter period of time.” (Community member # 14)

A tension observed across the samples was the idea that refugees are unaware of their tenancy rights. Most community members (n=15) said they understood their rights as a tenant and frequently act on these rights (for example, reporting maintenance problems or going to Housing NSW with problems). However, settlement workers said that African refugees are unaware of their Tenancy Rights and often struggle to maintain private rental properties. For example, refugees are not aware of the need to complete a detailed condition report when they enter into a lease, or may not be able to do so because of poor writing skills. This makes them vulnerable to landlords who may seek to recover their rental bond to pay for pre-existing damage.
4.3 Needed Interventions

All interviewees were asked to comment on what additional interventions they think are needed to better meet the housing needs of African refugees. Interviewees were asked to comment on the efficacy of existing and potential interventions. These comments were distilled to reveal four desirable additional interventions needed. These are (1) increasing housing stock and developing alternative housing models; (2) extension of case-management services; (3) culturally safe service provision; and (4) education for real estate agents and landlords about cross-cultural communication.

Across both samples was recognised the need to shift expectations. Settlement and housing workers said that African refugees must develop more realistic expectations of the housing sector. African community members and settlement workers were clear that the housing sector should demonstrate more inclusive and sensitive practices toward African families.

The desired interventions discussed in this section are not exhaustive of the ideas proposed to, or proposed by, participants in this study. They are the changes participants perceived as most important.

4.3.1 Increasing the stock of affordable housing: alternative housing models

A consultation by the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2009) recognised there is a shortage of affordable accommodation for refugees at the lower end of the rental market, and that both single people and large families face difficulties in securing stable accommodation. The consultations highlighted the need to fund more accommodation support programs and to consider alternative models of housing. As discussed in previous sections, housing workers and community members agreed that more affordable housing stock is desperately needed. Housing NSW workers interviewed expressed feeling helpless in the face of high demand for affordable housing:

“it’s just getting worse the affordability issue and the rising rents, and the unavailability of affordable accommodation. If someone is not at crisis point, if they’ve got somewhere to stay, then there’s not much we can do unfortunately.” (#3)

Two alternative models of medium-term and short-term housing was discussed in interviews: Head Leasing and Group Housing.

Community members were asked to consider the Head Leasing model of housing provision; a model involving the provision of a lease to an organisation that will subsequently grant leases to people who will be tenants in possession. Head Leasing has been rolled out by several community organisations that lease affordable properties from the private market and sublet these to new arrival refugees at a subsidised rate (DIAC 2008:10). All respondents thought this was a good alternative approach to help facilitate transition from the public to the private rental market. Having this “bridge” might provide them with more time to pursue other practicalities of settlement, like employment. One young man said:

“It would help them to settle down because, if they can have that [and] if they don’t have to worry about getting a place, you can worry about getting a job, rather than somewhere to stay.”

(Community member #7)

A further benefit of the Head Leasing model is that it is likely to increase the opportunity of refugees obtaining a supportive rental reference if the leasing organisation is sensitive to refugee issues. One man interviewed said Africans would be more comfortable talking with a community-based organisation granting a lease, compared with a real estate agent. Community members said the community organisation head leasing housing model could offer a more supportive environment in which they can learn how to manage finances, when compared with the private rental market:
“Head Leasing would be really good to help you to understand the rental system. It would help us to save a little bit of money, to buy clothes for yourself, and to be able to settle later, when you get your own house. And, it help you to realise what are your responsibilities and rights, your rights and responsibilities….so it would help you a lot on arrival.” (Community member #15)

“The model would be a good idea for single [parents] people, because they are the people who are facing a lot of problems in the community. And single, they are different, some of them could have many children and they don’t find a suitable house. They can’t afford it because they have less money.” (Community member #3)

Some respondents spoke more generally about the benefits of having secure housing and were keen for any alternative housing model that would promote this security. Several comments spoke to how secure housing helps African refugee communities heal and develop their strength:

“When you get the house, you settle, so the big part is like, is done. And then you will be starting to look for a job or for a study, to do something. You will be able to support or to contribute to do things.” (Community member #9)

“Once you have a house you can do other things with the peace in mind. And if we got something like this, we will, we will decrease homelessness, a little bit.” (Community member #4)

Earlier this year, DIAC opened a tender process for the Provision of Humanitarian Settlement Services. In this document Group Housing arrangements are discussed as a potential model suitable for “high needs clients” or “those for whom affordable housing can be difficult”. The Group Housing settings would ideally provide refugees in similar circumstances with the opportunity to share their early settlement experiences and support with one another. This model would comprise a block of apartments or flats, a cluster of closely located houses, or a boarding hostel. (DIAC, 2010B:56).

The Settlement Council of Australia (2009) has earlier expressed concern that Group or Cluster Housing “is likely to foster dependence, produce negative responses in the broader community to refugees and humanitarian entrants, and have a ‘ghettoising’ effect on people housed in this way. Similarly, concern was expressed that cluster housing “replaces one camp situation with another” (SCOA, 2009:8). Other members of SCOA recognised the model may suit single people, and would reduce isolation and facilitate peer support for some clients (SCOA, 2009:8).

4.3.2 Extension of case-management to African families: specialised refugee housing assistance

Searching for housing places significant stress on recently arrived African refugees. Settlement workers argued that additional support is required to minimise this stress, in the form of ‘special consideration’ by housing providers and extended case-work provision. In the context of generalised housing stress experienced by their client group, Housing NSW workers were reluctant to support the provision of ‘special treatment’ to African refugees.

One worker stressed that African refugees’ needs must be considered in the context of “such high demand!” for public housing. This worker said that 80% to 100% of her clients have complex needs. In the face of such need, she viewed “fairness” must characterise any planning about the housing needs of African refugees.

Another housing worker preferred a model of engagement with refugees where workers might demonstrate discretionary cultural sensitivity, saying:

“I think just showing clients that we do know what goes on out there and we understand the issues people face….If we say everyone from [that refugee] background gets special consideration, I guess we’re saying, well, everyone in that background has complex needs. However, the person might be able
to cope OK with just a little bit of help, whereas the next person may need a lot more help. And we can certainly use our resources in a better way than just putting a blanket kind of special consideration on the whole group.” (HNSW worker #1)

In contrast to this discretionary approach, several settlement workers and community members conveyed that an intensive case-management approach is needed. These workers were critical of generic forms of housing assistance (eg. pamphlets, mono-lingual community education), together with minimalist forms of case-managing, due to the significant and complex barriers faced by African refugees.

Traditionally, case-work is a model of practice used in the human services sector that involves building a trusting relationship with a client or family in order to conduct assessment, planning, facilitation and advocacy. Case-work can be compared with case-management insofar as it is more service user focused while case-management is more system focused. Case-management has been criticised on the basis it is technocratic in serving systemic and economic imperatives, when compared with the ‘holistic’ case-work emphasis on client’s interests (Fook 2002: 149). However, in this study case-management was recognised as the more valuable approach to helping refugee clients negotiate the housing system maze, incorporating traditional casework and case-management practices.

A status distinction was recognised by at least one caseworker between her role and the role of a case-manager. She is only able to see clients in the office whereas case-managers are able to advocate for clients in the field:

“Some clients feel like, maybe, I’m not doing much. I’m a caseworker and what it simply means that, I’m not a case management worker. If you’re case managing it means, for example, if you find a house through internet, you make appointment with the real estate and go with the clients and inspect the house and talk to the real estate face to face. Whereas with a case worker like me … I cannot accompany clients because I’m not equipped to do that.” (Settlement worker #2)

It was clear that both workers and community members want extended case-management support, beyond the 6 month case-management provided in the IHSS. Case-management is a key factor in “connecting” refugees to appropriate services:

“When I came here I was under IHSS and they inform me all the time about what is happening and, and help me a lot with a lot of things, so I didn’t have any problems or fear because I have someone who inform me all the time. After they exited my case, then I came to the department of housing, and I didn’t have that information. Everything was disconnected. If we have someone or a service that can give us advice, especially for housing, that would be really good, someone who have time to spend more time giving us information, helping us with the housing or able to talk to real estate or department of housing or community housing, that would be really good.” (Community member #5)

It seems important, too, that case-management involves a trusting relationship. One African refugee woman said that people need more time with workers to develop trusting relationships:

“it takes them time to really share their feelings; they just say they’re not happy, they’re not well. They don’t sit down to actually share ideas to see what that worker can do.” (Community member #14)

Without the one-to-one support, a few women said they feel like they have lost their way:

“I think it would be helpful to have bridge, between the services and the community, because that is a big gap. If we have bridge between services provider and community, I think it would be much easier to cross the road. It would be good to have some people fill the gap.” (Community member #15)
“Australia is big. But if you do have someone... enlighten you, to tell you, you don’t know anything, you know? You are totally blind. It’s like, what am I going to drown here? You know? You need a case-worker to explain many things you should know.” (Community member #11)

All African community members voiced support for a specialised Refugee Housing Service. Four respondents wanted case-workers who are better informed and skilled in housing issues, making comment that generalist workers are not always well informed. Two other community members wanted specialist housing workers who could act as “witnesses” for refugees who are trying to maintain tenancies. For example, workers who could do home visits and evaluate the maintenance level of the dwelling, if requested by the tenant. Other practice initiatives were suggested for the specialist housing service. The provision of accurate information in a variety of community languages and resources was suggested. Two people wanted the service to be an environment where they could meet others, talk about housing issues and receive some emotional support.

4.3.3 Culturally safe communication

Culturally safe practice towards African refugees will include using appropriate community languages. A necessary change required to help African refugees obtain housing is to increase the diversity of African community languages available through the Telephone-Interpreting-Service (TIS) and at Housing NSW.

“When you go to Department of Housing [NSW], you press a button you press, Arabic, English, or Vietnamese for example. When you look for Dinka, it’s not there. Some Arabic speakers will press Arabic, but it is Lebanese Arabic and they don’t understand Lebanese Arabic...Then African refugees just let it go because they don’t want hard thing to go through it” (Community member #9)

A Housing NSW worker (#2) said he had not seen any promotional material in African community languages:

“A lot of our stuff will be in Arabic, Chinese, Turkish, and Vietnamese. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything in Swahili, French, or Dinka? You don’t, you don’t see stuff in there, in those languages. Housing doesn’t have any.”

Several respondents additionally spoke of the benefit in recruiting more African interpreters through TIS and at Housing NSW. The lack of African bi-lingual staff in support services impedes communication and trust. Two community members said that apart from not being able to understand people, without an interpreter they feel less secure about whatever they are being told. “I need to go and get someone else to come and interpret for me otherwise I can’t talk to Real estate agent face to face. They won’t understand me.” (Community member #2)

The lack of African language interpreters contracted by TIS, and the problem of how demand outweighs current resources, was evidenced in a recent DIAC consultation (2010) where it was reported that an African language interpreter was booked by one service to interpret for three different people at the same time. Clearly, there is a need for more TIS contractors who can interpret across a greater variety of African languages.

In our study was some evidence for a gender dimension to the use of interpreters. All five male African community members interviewed said they have never used an interpreter. This finding is concerning. It has been identified elsewhere (Bond 2010) that risk factors and access to support services vary by gender and there is a need to further develop programs that mentor African men.
4.3.4 Cross cultural community education for real estate agents and landlords

A strong desire for real estate agents and landlords to be more sensitive toward, and inclusive of, African refugees was evidenced in interviews. Participants were asked to comment on a community education strategy in Victoria where workshops had been developed for local real estate agents to increase their understanding of the housing and settlement needs of minority groups including refugee families (MRRHAP 2007). Participants were asked if they thought a similar strategy would work in Western Sydney and which stakeholders might be included in this strategy.

Community members supported the strategy of raising awareness among real estate agents through workshops because they anticipated this would increase access to housing:

“it be really good if real estate aware of culture. That would be helpful because um I can tell that real estates only be offering house to the people that they really know people who are born here in Australia. They don’t really know us so they don’t give out the house.” (Community member #19)

Housing NSW workers were supportive of education workshops for real estate agents to promote access and equity in the private rental sector for refugees:

“Working with real estate agents is part of my job and there is a barrier there. And it’s hard to say whether it’s discrimination, but there is a lack of willingness to house people from African backgrounds. So I definitely see having a united front with the real estates, and more education to them, is a good thing” (HNSW worker #3)

This worker went onto discuss the potential challenges in getting the private rental sector involved in workshops, including the challenge of prejudice:

“The problem is trying to get the real estates to do those educational things. And the reason why I say that is that I have experience educating the real estates about what we [Housing NSW] can help with and what is good things for clients. For example what Tenancy Guarantees are, and a new thing called, ‘Rent it, keep it.’ They’re very funny about those sort of things. Especially in those suburbs that don’t need public housing tenants.”

All of the settlement workers agreed that raising awareness of the plight of African refugees among real estate agents would be helpful. One settlement worker said the training should include information about broader networks of support and advocacy available for refugees:

“They have to know the work that we [settlement workers] do to help them, to help the clients. That we educate them about house maintenance and all this stuff. We can develop a network connection with real estate agents. Open dialogue, it’s really important between a real estate and the community. To speak and have conversation and talk together. Get to know each other - this is what we should be working for.” (#3)

Of interest was the real estate agent interviewee suggesting that training should be targeted at property owners, as well as estate agents. He indicated also the potential for those real estate agents who have more experience working with minority cultures to share knowledge with other real estate agents:

“when you’ve worked with a certain culture for a number of years, you understand them. At first they’re hard to understand, but then the more you listen, the more you understand.” (Real estate agent #1)

Amongst the anticipated outcomes of educating real estate agents about cultural issues was greater use of interpreting services and quicker responses to tenant requests.
4.3.5 Acting on realistic expectations

There was consistent support across both samples for more realistic expectations to be adopted. African community members want the housing sector to adjust their expectations of refugees and acknowledge the extensive barriers they face re-settling in Australia. Housing workers want Africans to understand the limitations of the public and social housing systems.

A number of African community members interviewed said they have felt disappointment since arriving in Australia due to Australia not providing them with a refuge from fear and insecurity. The resettlement experience for one single mother feels like being a child again:

“Before I get citizenship I was a little happy, but then I get sick. I am thinking, Why I came here? What I am doing? I don’t know anything. I re-start again, everything I am supposed to ask why? I am an adult, I am supposed to do things by myself, so why I am I always asking, ‘can you help me? help me!’” (Community member #20)

In the area of housing, perhaps the area where the greatest adjustments to expectations are needed is in regard to rental histories. Just under half (n=8) of the African participants said that the expectation of rental histories constituted the most difficult hurdle with real estate agencies. The expectation that housing seekers have a good rental history has forced some community members to stay in difficult and unsuitable housing arrangements. To combat this form of discrimination it was suggested an option be included on application forms titled “have limited/no rental history [due to Refugee or Special Humanitarian Program Entrant status].”

Housing workers interviewed also wanted expectations to shift; they want housing clients to have more realistic expectations of the housing sector. One Housing NSW worker said:

“there is a false expectation that is really high and I don’t know if it’s because what their community advises them? A lot of people will come and say ‘my cousin applied to HNSW and she came out the next day with a place and she’s only got one child. I’ve got ten sick children. Why has she been given priority housing and I haven’t?’ A lot of stories get around in the community about what HNSW can do and at times people can be quite demanding, quite confronting…people are desperate, and people will do anything to get housing. That goes across all groups.” (HNSW worker #1)

This worker was keen for African refugees to adjust their expectations and acknowledge there is a wait for housing. She wanted African community members to have “back up plans” and not assume they will obtain housing immediately.
5. LOOKING AHEAD: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 IMPLICATIONS

Our findings suggest variability within the experiences of those African refugees interviewed in seeking housing. However, typical experiences on the way to obtaining housing in Western Sydney among African refugees included: the use of Housing NSW products, limited case-management support following exit from the IHSS, and resilience demonstrated by African refugees who would search daily for rental properties until they found one.

A key finding in this study is that providing refugees with housing assistance is of benefit, however, it has not led to the successful obtainment of decent long-term housing for many African refugees. This study supports previous calls for more affordable and decent housing. Public housing has traditionally been a safety valve for the private rental market and a stepping stone into home ownership for low and moderate income earners. However, at 4.5 per cent of Australia’s total housing stock, public housing cannot provide a realistic alternative to the private rental market for all low income earners (FaHCSIA 2009). Australia urgently needs to expand the stock of affordable rental housing.

In this study was evidence of a number of barriers or obstacles that prevent African refugees from obtaining housing. Limited literacy and English language skills combined with no rental history place many African refugees at a disadvantage.

The implication here is that African refugees are not on an equal footing with native-born Australians, and therein should not be expected to be able to compete with Australians on equal terms when it comes to housing.

In order to better assist recently arrived African refugees to obtain housing, this study identified several desirable changes needed. These are: developing alternative housing models, extension of case management services beyond the IHSS period, culturally safe practice in the housing sector including access to African community language interpreters and acknowledgement of refugees’ limited rental history, and finally, cross-cultural education to real-estate agents, landlords and community members. In light of these, the report makes a number of recommendations.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. An ongoing funding mechanism to increase the capacity of existing settlement programs to perform case-management and community education relevant to housing beyond the IHSS period. Given the multiple forms of adversity faced by refugees, longer-term support is needed.

2. Increase funding and development of the Telephone Interpreting Service (TIS), including the continuation of funding to train people (free of cost) to become accredited to translate in rare and emerging languages through the TIS. This study demonstrates that overcoming language barriers is pivotal for successful settlement of African refugees.
3. To increase the capacity of organisations funded through the Settlement Grants program (SGP) to deliver education workshops about housing for the private rental market sector and for refugee communities. Questions on private rental application forms about previous rental history to be amended to recognise recent arrivals under various programs.

4. The feasibility of DIAC providing project funding for a refugee-specific housing hub in Western Sydney to be investigated. Potential benefits of this service as identified in this study are: having bi-lingual and multi-lingual workers who are specialised in housing options, applications and processes; the provision of case-management in relation to housing; in addition to strengthening advocacy in the region.

5. Alternative housing models including head leasing by not-for-profit organisations should be extended. In this model, community organisations rent affordable properties on the private market and sublet these to newly-arrived humanitarian entrants or refugees at full or below market rent. Strong support was found for this model in the project among African community members.

6. Housing NSW to further endorse and strengthen comprehensive models of practice when working with complex or at risk clients. The value of providing intensive support to refugees on a one on one basis was evidenced in this study.

7. Further research to be conducted into the gendered aspects of African settlement including how to better meet the needs of single African women and how to increase the use of support services in Western Sydney by African men.

6. REFERENCE LIST


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Colic –Peisker, V & Tilbury, F (2003) “Active” and “Passive” Resettlement: the influence of support services and refugees’ own resources on re-settlement style, International Migration, 41(5): 61 -86


Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (2003), Australia’s support for humanitarian entrants (2nd ed). Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs: Canberra.


REFERENCE LIST CONT...


7. APPENDICES

7.1 APPENDIX
1 PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Total = 21</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>1 (male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Southern and East Africa</td>
<td>1 Burundian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Languages Spoken and Understood         |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| English (16), Arabic (6), Dinka (9), Juba Arabic (1), Kiswahili (3), Somali (0), Amharic (3), French (4), Other: Madi (1), Ascholli (1), Fullah (2), Krio (3), Kirundi (1), Timenee (1), Ghanian (1), Liberian (1), Linganla (1), Tigrina (1). |

| Interpreters Used                      |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| Always (8), Mostly (0), Sometimes (3), Never (10) |

| What is your Current Marital Status?   |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| Never married (8), Defacto (0), Married (3), Divorced/separated (4), Widow/widower (6) |

| Children/Dependents Co-Habituating     |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| Yes (15), No (6)                        |

| Highest Level of Education             |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| Primary (4), Secondary (3), TAFE (or equivalent) (6), University (3), None (5), Other (extra 4: SCL; CSA; MRC classes) |

| Employed?                              |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| Yes (5), No (17)                        |

| If Yes, What Type?                     |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| Permanent full-time (1), Permanent part-time (2), Contracted for a set period of time (0), Casual (2), Self employed (0), Don’t know (0) |

| Current Housing?                       |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| Private rental (15), Public housing (5), Self-serviced unit (0), Hotel/motel/caravan Park (0), Own a home (0), Living with a friend/relative (1 - homeless) |
7.2 APPENDIX

2: COMMUNITY MEMBER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

African Refugee Housing and Homelessness in western Sydney

This interview is designed to help us better understand refugees’ housing experiences in Sydney.

The focus of this interview is how to learn more about African refugee housing issues. We are talking with people like you, to find out about the different housing experiences of people, and how you think refugees can be better assisted to find housing.

The information you provide us will be used for statistical and evaluation purposes only. This interview is completely confidential and your name will not be used in the report. By completing this interview you are consenting to take part in this survey.

Interview Schedule: Community Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data entered</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1) Interviewee Name/I.D.

2) Gender: [ ] Male [ ] Female

In the first part of the interview, I am going to ask you some questions about yourself!

PART A: ABOUT YOU

3) What is your age? ......................... years

4) What is your country of origin
   (and tribe if applicable)?

..................................................

..................................................
5) What date did you arrive in Australia?
   Month: ........................................ Year: .................................

6) Which visa did you arrive with?
   ☐ Refugee Visa (200)
   ☐ Woman at Risk (204)
   ☐ Special Humanitarian Program (202)
   ☐ Other, please specify

7) What languages do you speak and understand?
   (tick all that apply)
   ☐ English  ☐ Arabic
   ☐ Dinka  ☐ Juba Arabic
   ☐ Kiswahili  ☐ Somali
   ☐ Amharic  ☐ French
   ☐ Other, please specify

8) When you talk with people from organisations,
   how often do you use an interpreter?
   ☐ Always  ☐ Mostly
   ☐ Sometimes  ☐ Never

9) What is your current marital status?
   ☐ Never married  ☐ Defacto
   ☐ Married  ☐ Divorced/separated
   ☐ Widow/widower

10) Do you have any children living with you?
    ☐ Yes - Go to Question 10a
    ☐ No - Go to Question 11

10a) If Yes, how many and what are their ages?
    (Please insert answers below)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Gender M/F</th>
<th>Age in years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.g. Child 1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 11</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
11) What level of education did you reach?
- □ Primary
- □ Secondary
- □ TAFE (or equivalent)
- □ University (or equivalent)
- □ None
- □ Other, please specify

12) Are you currently in any paid employment?
- □ Yes – go to Q12a
- □ No – go to Q13

12a) If YES, what type of employment? (Please tick)
- □ Permanent full-time
- □ Permanent part-time
- □ Contracted for a set period of time
- □ Casual
- □ Self employed
- □ Don’t know

13) Which of the following is your main source of income now?
- □ Wages
- □ Newstart Allowance
- □ Austudy
- □ Youth Allowance
- □ Parenting Payment Partnered
- □ Parenting Payment Single
- □ Disability Support Payment
- □ Other, please specify

14) How would you describe your current housing? (Please tick)
- □ Private rental
- □ Public housing
- □ Self-serviced unit
- □ Hotel/motel/caravan Park
- □ Own a home
- □ Living with a friend/relative
- □ Other, please specify

15) Who lives with you at home? (e.g. spouse, children, aunties etc)
PART B: ABOUT YOUR HOUSING HISTORY

For the next part of our interview, we would like you to tell us, in your own words, about your housing, since arriving in Sydney.

16) When you first arrived in Australia, tell me about the first place that you lived in?

(Prompt questions) How did you find it? What kind of problems did you experience finding that place? What length of time were you there for? Why did you leave this house?

17) Think about where you are living now, how secure do you feel that your tenancy? Why?

18) How many homes have you lived in since you arrived in Australia? How long did you live at each place?

19) Overall, how happy (satisfied) are you with your current housing situation?

☐ Very happy ☐ Unhappy
☐ Happy ☐ Very unhappy

19b) Please tell us why:

PART C: ABOUT YOUR HOUSING ISSUES

In this section, we would like you to tell us more about certain issues or problems you have dealt with, when looking for housing.

20) How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your housing experiences in Sydney? Please tick a box on each line.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>a) I have lived/rented several places since arrival in Sydney</td>
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<tr>
<td>b) Rent is often more than I can afford to pay</td>
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<tr>
<td>c) I have had frequent increases in rental rates</td>
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<td>d) There is a limited supply of appropriate (i.e. in good condition and adequate size) housing for low income earners</td>
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<td>e) My family (or group of friends) have been forced to live in overcrowded places</td>
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<td>f) My family (or group of friends) has had some problems because we have lived in overcrowded places</td>
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21) Is there anything else you would like to comment on about your housing issues/problems?

- g) There is not enough affordable housing close to access community services e.g. Centrelink; English classes
- h) There is not enough affordable housing close to access other people in my community
- i) It is difficult to find affordable housing which is close to public transport
- j) To get basic repairs I have to wait a long time before a landlord acts if at all
- k) I am not happy to ask for maintenance and repairs of the places I have rented
- l) I am unclear about all of my tenancy rights and responsibilities
- m) Often I have been treated differently because of my ethnicity
- n) I have found it difficult to understand the Australian housing system
- o) I have found it difficult to access social housing
- p) I have found it difficult to talk with real estate agents
- q) Other. Please specify:
PART D: FUTURE STRATEGIES

In this last section of the interview, we would like to know how you think housing for refugees can be improved in Sydney. For example:

22) If there was a group which could share information about housing issues for you and other refugees, and act as an advocate for the community, how helpful do you think this would be?

(Prompt questions) For example, it may include community leaders/members, settlement workers, MRCs, people from Housing NSW, and real estate agents. From this group different key housing representatives could be selected, this network of key housing reps would be able to alert the communities of changes to policies and/or new services/initiatives... accompany people to appointments with real estates, etc. Are there any other people who should be included? Why do you think these people would be helpful?

23) Often people will ask settlement workers for assistance/help with their housing issues. If there was a service that provided advice and support specifically for refugee housing issues, what do you think it should include?

(Prompt questions) And why do you think this/these should be included? Tasks could include: negotiation with local government, Housing NSW, real estate agents, landlords, DIAC, etc. The service could also provide advice and translation services for all stakeholders, train other services and/or the broader community about the visa conditions and their relationship to the housing circumstances of refugees and other similar issues as they arise.

24) If you think about how refugees and real estate agents can have cultural difficulties, would an ongoing community education campaign for real estate agents help?

(Prompt questions) By campaign, we mean develop an on-going group of people (workers, agents, refugees, etc) who can provide real estate agents with more information about the history of refugees, Centrepay, the importance of local community organisations, translation services, etc. How do you think it would help?
25) How does your community assist people with their housing issues?


26) Amongst many refugee families, there are some with only one parent (often the mum) looking after all of the children. In your experience, what are the difficulties which single-parent families experience in your culture that you know about, with regard to housing?


27) Many African refugees apply for Housing NSW, although are unsuccessful with their applications. What is your experience with Housing NSW?


28) Some community organisations have tried to assist refugees with renting housing using what is referred to as “Head Leasing”. This means that community organisations rent affordable properties on the private market and sublet to new arrivals at the full or lower rent. If this was used in Sydney, how helpful do you think it would be to African refugees?


29) Are there any other comments or suggestions which you would like to make?
7.3 APPENDIX

3: SETTLEMENT WORKERS INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

African Refugee Housing and Homelessness in western Sydney

Participant Name:

Participant Job Title:

Organisation Name:

Organisation Contact Details:

Interview Schedule – POP2 Settlement workers

OFFICE USE ONLY

Date

Interviewed

Data entered

PART A: ABOUT AFRICAN REFUGEE TENANTS

1) What proportion of your clients from African refugee backgrounds are currently seeking assistance with housing issues?

- [ ] a) None
- [ ] b) 1% - 5%
- [ ] c) 5% - 10%
- [ ] d) 10% - 20%
- [ ] e) 20%-30%
- [ ] f) 30% - 40%
- [ ] g) Over 40%

2) How many individuals or families from African refugee backgrounds have you assisted over the past twelve months?

- [ ] a) None
- [ ] b) 1 - 9
- [ ] c) 10 – 19
- [ ] d) 20 – 29
- [ ] e) 30 - 39
- [ ] f) 40-49
- [ ] g) 50 – 99
- [ ] h) 100 or more
3) In your experience, what things make it difficult for African refugees when trying to secure long-term housing?

☐ a) Need for interpreters
☐ b) Have limited/no rental history
☐ c) No funds for rental bond
☐ d) Have limited/no employment history
☐ e) They have limited/no transport to inspect
☐ f) Main income is Centrelink
☐ g) Difficulty with completing forms
☐ h) Rent is often too expensive
☐ i) They have health issues
☐ j) Don’t understand their legal obligations
☐ k) Don’t understand the housing system
☐ l) I don’t know/ not applicable
☐ m) Other: Please specify below

4) From what we know, African refugees typically move house every 6 to 12 months. Why do you think this happens?

5) Research about refugees and housing conducted in 2007 by Anglicare Tasmania also interviewed real estate agents. The agents identified a lack of access to free interpreting services and lack of knowledge of support services as problems in dealing with refugee tenants. What has been your experience on these issues when working with African refugee clients searching for housing? How have you dealt with them?

6) Apart from these difficulties just discussed, are there any other difficulties you experience when working with African refugee clients searching for housing? How have you dealt with them?

7) Have you experienced more difficulties with African refugees searching for housing than other cultural groups? If so is there a particular group with whom you experience the most difficulty?

8) Do you see any emerging difficulties for African refugees, with regard to securing tenancies? If so, what are these difficulties?
9) When African refugees come for housing assistance from your organisation, on average how often would people come in when they have been evicted or are in the process of being evicted (i.e. at the last moment)?

☐ a) daily
☐ b) two to three instances per week
☐ c) once per week
☐ d) less often
☐ e) never

10) A few of the African refugee respondents whom we have interviewed said some people in the communities suffer from depression, and a few have committed suicide as a result of housing stress. A couple of them suggested that housing stress has led to couples separating, and families to breakdown. Can you relate to me any recent instances of this?

How have you been able to help?

11) It appears that some African refugee families are alleviating their rental problems through a practice called a ‘lease swap’. One person (African refugee tenant) with a secure lease and good rental history applies and signs a lease for a house/unit on behalf of a friend/relative who does not have a good rental history. Apparently, once the second property is found for the friend/relative, the first person (with the good rental history) asks the real estate agent if he/she can apply for this new dwelling, while their friend/relative (with poor rental history) takes over their home.

How widespread do you believe this practice is? Have there been negative outcomes for African refugees doing this?
PART B: STRATEGIES

12) Do you think that housing providers would benefit from receiving more information about cultural groups such as African refugees? What information do you think would be most important to them? In your opinion, would a cross cultural educational campaign for real estate agents help? For example, in Victoria (2007) a research project focused on developing networks and delivering workshops for local real estate agents, to increase their understanding of the housing and settlement needs of migrant and refugee families). What do you think about this as an option?

13) Our research suggests that refugees who develop relationships in the community, such as with near neighbours, are more likely to be happy than those who do not, despite their homes being too small and more expensive than they can afford. One woman explained that ‘she’s happy and the reason is that the neighbours are really good, and she’s not actually worried about her kids...’ In your experience, would you say that such relationships make a big difference to African refugees? Would you say that family groups tend to be happier than those African refugees who live on their own?

14) African refugees often come to Australia from war-torn countries and with little understanding of the way in which our society works. We have found from our interviews that a degree of flexibility from agents can go a long way in ensuring that African tenancies become long term. Do you think that special consideration should be given to African refugees as tenants? If so what kind of special considerations do you think would be fair and reasonable?

15) Why do you believe that some African refugees manage to secure a bond, while others don’t? What are the main factors?

16) What strategies would assist African refugees to secure a bond more readily? (Prompt: What kind of percentage would use Centrepay? How many (%) access Housing NSW’s Tenancy Agreement Guarantee Project?)
PART C: RECOMMENDATIONS

In this last section of the interview, we would like to know how you think housing for refugees can improve in Sydney.

17) In your opinion what most needs to happen to help African refugees secure tenancies?

18) A couple of the African refugee respondents suggested that as their communities are relatively young in Australia and still establishing its roots, that they need more intense help for the first 12 months after their arrival, and more African workers/employees across the housing and community sectors. What else do you think is needed for African refugees to establish their ‘housing roots’ in Sydney?

19) What advice would you give to African refugees to assist them in securing tenancies?

20) What advice would you give to organisations (like ANGLICARE) who assist African refugees?
## PART A: ABOUT YOUR TENANTS AND APPLICANTS

In this first section, we are going to ask you some questions about your African refugee applicants and tenants. Refugee applicants and tenants may be different to other tenants as they would have only limited or no housing history.

1) Approximately what proportion of people applying for public housing in this region are from African refugee backgrounds?

- [ ] a) None
- [ ] b) 1% - 5%
- [ ] c) 5% - 10%
- [ ] d) 10% - 20%
- [ ] e) 20% - 30%
- [ ] f) 30% - 40%
- [ ] g) Over 40%
2) Of these African refugee applicants, what proportion would have been given ‘Rent Start’ assistance?

- [ ] a) None
- [ ] b) 1%–20%
- [ ] c) 20%–40%
- [ ] d) 40%–60%
- [ ] e) 60%–80%
- [ ] f) 80%–100%

3) Of these African refugee applicants, what proportion would have been given ‘other assistance’?

- [ ] a) None
- [ ] b) 1%–20%
- [ ] c) 20%–40%
- [ ] d) 40%–60%
- [ ] e) 60%–80%
- [ ] f) 80%–100%

4) Of these African refugee applicants, what proportion would have been housed?

- [ ] a) None
- [ ] b) 1%–20%
- [ ] c) 20%–40%
- [ ] d) 40%–60%
- [ ] e) 60%–80%
- [ ] f) 80%–100%

5) Are SINGLE applicants approved and processed quicker than family units? If so, why is this?

- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]

6) Among African refugee applicants, are many assessed to have complex needs? About what percentage of all African refugee applicants over the past twelve months has demonstrated complex needs?

- [ ] a) None
- [ ] b) 1%–20%
- [ ] c) 20%–40%
- [ ] d) 40%–60%
- [ ] e) 60%–80%
- [ ] f) 80%–100%

[Prompt: how do you define complex’?]
7) In your experience, what types of things make it difficult for African refugee applicants when submitting housing applications?

- [ ] a) Need for interpreters
- [ ] h) Rent is often too expensive
- [ ] b) Have limited/no rental history
- [ ] i) They have health issues
- [ ] c) No funds for rental bond
- [ ] j) Don’t understand their legal obligations
- [ ] d) Have limited/no employment history
- [ ] k) Don’t understand the housing system
- [ ] e) They have limited/no transport to inspect
- [ ] l) I don’t know/ not applicable
- [ ] f) Main income is Centrelink
- [ ] m) Other: Please specify below
- [ ] g) Difficulty with completing forms

8) According to our research, a growing number of African refugee applicant/tenants have been successful in securing housing through the Tenancy Agreement Guarantee Project. But they have said that while bond assistance helps people enter the private rental market, it does not make tenancies sustainable. From your experience is this correct and, if so, why does it occur?

9) Research about refugees and housing conducted in 2007 by Anglicare Tasmania found that housing providers identified their lack of access to free interpreting services and lack of knowledge of support services as their own biggest difficulties in dealing with African refugee applicant/tenants. Have there been particular issues for HNSW in dealing with African refugees?

10) Apart from these difficulties just discussed, are there any other difficulties HNSW experiences with African refugees? How does HNSW deal with them?

11) Have you experienced more difficulties with African refugees than other cultural groups? If so is there a particular group with whom you experience the most difficulty?

12) Do you see any emerging difficulties for African refugees, with regard to securing tenancies? If so, what are these difficulties?
PART B: STRATEGIES

13) Do you think that HNSW workers would benefit from receiving more information about cultural groups such as African refugees? What information do you think would be of most importance to your staff? In your opinion, would a cross cultural educational campaign for real estate agents help? For example, in Victoria (2007) a research project focused on developing networks and delivering workshops for local real estate agents, to increase their understanding of the housing and settlement needs of migrant and refugee families. What do you think about this as an option?

14) From your experience, what makes an African refugees’ HNSW application a successful one?

15) According to Anglicare Tasmania research (2007), to live in public housing is a widespread aspiration among refugees. The affordability and security of tenure were the two features of public housing which were most desired. However there is a poor match between the needs of refugees and Housing Tasmania’s assessment criteria. African refugee applicants may find themselves allocated points for public housing because they are in financial stress or housing crisis but not because of settlement or cultural needs. Public housing therefore is only potentially available as a crisis intervention but not as part of good settlement practice. Would you say that the same situation exists among refugee applicants for public housing in NSW? Why?

16) Many African refugees live in overcrowded homes as there is a limited supply of suitably-sized homes for larger families. How does family unit size impact upon the outcome of African refugee applications to HNSW?

17) African refugees come to Australia from war-torn countries and with little understanding of the way in which our society works. We have found from our interviews that a degree of flexibility from housing providers can go a long way in ensuring that African tenancies become long term. Do you think that special consideration should be given to African refugees in applying to be HNSW tenants? If so what kind of special considerations do you think would be fair and reasonable?
PART C: RECOMMENDATIONS

In this last section of the interview, we would like to know how you think housing for refugees can improve in Sydney.

18) In your opinion what most needs to happen to help African refugees secure tenancies with HNSW?

19) What advice would you give to African refugees to assist them in securing tenancies with HNSW?

20) What advice would you give to organisations (like ANGLICARE) who assist African refugees with their HNSW queries?
### Part A: About Your Tenants and Applicants

In this first section, we are going to ask you some questions about African refugee applicants and tenants. Refugee applicants and tenants may be different to other tenants as they would have only limited or no housing history.

1) Approximately what proportion of your current tenants are from African refugee backgrounds?

- [ ] a) None
- [ ] b) 1% - 5%
- [ ] c) 5% - 10%
- [ ] d) 10% - 20%
- [ ] e) 20%-30%
- [ ] f) 30% - 40%
- [ ] g) Over 40%
2) In your experience, what things make it difficult for African refugees when they submit rental applications?

☐ a) Need for interpreters
☐ b) Have limited/no rental history
☐ c) No funds for rental bond
☐ d) Have limited/no employment history
☐ e) They have limited/no transport to inspect
☐ f) Main income is Centrelink
☐ g) Difficulty with completing forms
☐ h) Rent is often too expensive
☐ i) They have health issues
☐ j) Don’t understand their legal obligations
☐ k) Don’t understand the rental system
☐ l) I don’t know/ not applicable
☐ m) Other: Please specify below

3) From what we know, African refugees typically move house every 6 to 12 months. Why do you think this happens?

5) Apart from these difficulties just discussed, are there any other difficulties you experience with African refugees? How have you dealt with them?

6) According to Anglicare Tasmania research, real estate agents identified their biggest concerns with refugee tenants as being language barriers, a lack of rental and employment histories, and problems communicating about maintenance and repair issues. What has been your experience on these issues in relation to African refugees?

7) Have you experienced more difficulties with African refugees than other cultural groups? If so is there a particular group with whom you experience the most difficulty?

8) Do you see any emerging difficulties for African refugees, with regard to securing tenancies? If so, what are these difficulties?
PART B: STRATEGIES

9) Do you think that real estate agents would benefit from receiving more information about cultural groups such as African refugees? What information do you think would be most important to agents? In your opinion, would a cross cultural educational campaign for real estate agents help? For example, in Victoria (2007) a research project focused on developing networks and delivering workshops for local real estate agents, to increase their understanding of the housing and settlement needs of migrant and refugee families. What do you think about this as an option?

10) From your experience, what makes an African refugees’ rental application a successful one?

11) There is a degree of frustration among African refugees about a lack of feedback on failed rental applications. What could be done to improve this situation?

12) Many of our research participants have also said they struggle at times to get basic maintenance done by landlords or real estate agents. What could be done to improve this situation?

13) African refugees come to Australia from war-torn countries and with little understanding of the way in which our society works. We have found from our interviews that a degree of flexibility from agents can go a long way in ensuring that African tenancies become long term. Do you think that special consideration should be given to African refugees as tenants? If so what kind of special considerations do you think would be fair and reasonable?

14) We understand there is a tenant “Black List” database. How would someone be added to it? And how would they be removed from it?
PART C: RECOMMENDATIONS

In this last section of the interview, we would like to know what changes you think could be made to achieve more positive housing outcomes for African refugees in Sydney.

15) In your opinion what most needs to happen to help African refugees secure tenancies?

16) What advice would you give to African refugees to assist them in securing tenancies?

17) What advice would you give to organisations (like ANGLICARE) who assist African refugees?