Helping to create community care for migrants

Migrants and refugees face a host of never-ending, constantly mutating problems. The media spews scandalous headlines, unconscionable cuts to the legal aid significantly deter vulnerable migrants from obtaining effective representation, and the government has an unwavering determination to make the UK a hostile or ‘compliant’ environment. But those of us who work with migrants know that in the face of all of these big, grand problems, it often becomes easy to forget and dismiss a seemingly trivial problem – and one that is universally experienced by migrants and non-migrants alike: loneliness.

Concepts like homesickness, culture shock and language barriers are now well-known. The NHS has pages dedicated to informing potential travellers about these problems and how to address them. Likewise, many universities have schemes to help international students to adapt into their lives in the UK months before they even arrive. Yet when it comes to vulnerable migrants and refugees, it is understandably difficult to prioritise problems like culture shock over the very real threats of indefinite detention, destitution and homelessness, or forcible removal to places where lives are at risk. As a result these ‘small’ problems are often overlooked, with many charities and organisations focusing all of their energies and resources largely (if not solely) on helping migrants and refugees to obtain the right advice and good representation.

However, as anyone who has ever dealt with the Home Office or any public authority can attest, the big, grand problems often seem impossible to solve. Careless decisions, fatuous reasoning and senseless conduct pervade the immigration and social welfare system, leading to what should have been easily avoidable delays and hardships, which inevitably, breed desperation and frustrations. This happens even with the right advice and representation. For someone who is going through the process, therefore, the main challenge is not necessarily being able to understand the immigration rules or the duties of the local authority, but often simply how to get through the process without becoming othered, isolated or alone.

The distinctive feature of the Community Programme at Migrants Organise, therefore, as the name suggests, is its focus on creating a community for the migrants and refugees. The programme started as a mentoring scheme, created specifically to help migrants and refugees (whom we call members) to feel less alone in a new environment. The mentoring scheme matches them with a volunteer mentor, who can provide them with one-to-one emotional and personal support. They would meet at least once a week all around London. Many of the matches, however, would eventually develop strong relationships – our mentors would often contact us, and even other organisations, on behalf of their mentees when they faced a problem.

This was then supplemented by the various socio-educational classes and activities that we organise. These classes and activities are constantly changing, mainly depending on members’ interests. Currently we have English language classes, a well-being class, a football group, a voice group and the recently added theatre group. The main aim of the classes and activities is not only to educate our members or provide them with new skills, but to provide them with a space where they can meet people who are going through similar problems. The flexibility of the classes and activities also allow some of our members to contribute to the community: our football group, for example, was started and coordinated by one of our own members.

October

6: Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed by the US Senate and sworn in as a Supreme Court judge. Kavanaugh made a number of demonstrably untrue statements during his confirmation hearings, in which he answered allegations of sexual assault and misconduct.

1,172 Number of super-rich given Tier 1 investor visas in 2014 – up from 211 in 2010 – redesigned in 2011 by Theresa May to attract rich foreign investors while introducing a ‘hostile environment’ to curb overall immigration.

£10m Investment sum needed to apply for indefinite leave to remain after two years in UK.
Difficult). We help with claiming applications a fantastically course, makes funding our members with (which, of other services, the Community Programme does not have a welfare and legal advice and eventually expanded to offer help from our members, even if it's something as simple as helping them with their CV. There are, of course, a lot of issues which are beyond our expertise. But whenever we are unable to provide the advice internally, we would help our members find the support that they need and continue to ensure that they receive quality support. In carrying our day-to-day work, we are also extremely proud of the warm and welcoming environment that, we believe, can be felt the moment someone steps into the office. We have a small office in Ladbroke Grove, which is often filled with our members and their families. No one at Migrants Organise has complete ownership of their desk or office, which means even our chief executive is sometimes evicted from her room when one of our members needs somewhere private for advice. We also introduce new members to local authorities on various issues involving housing and community care, and with the NHS on overseas charging issues. We give immigration advice, help to apply for exceptional case funding, refer our members to legal aid solicitors, help them raise a complaint against solicitors, and often assist with the progress of the case. We also help our members apply for various destinations grants and apply for educational courses and volunteering opportunities. It is rare that we would turn down any request for help from our members, even if it's something as simple as helping them with their CV. There are, of course, a lot of issues which are beyond our expertise. But whenever we are unable to provide the advice internally, we would help our members find the support that they need and continue to ensure that they receive quality support. As a result, many of our members often come to the office even when they do not have any appointments. When they attend classes, for example, they often still drop by the office to say hello to our caseworkers and even to our advising barrister. Some decide to volunteer at the office, helping with things like administrative matters, while some eventually become volunteer mentors themselves.

The holistic and intensive nature of the Community Programme, of course, has its downsides. We have a relatively small capacity and often have to refuse those who we think are eligible to receive help from other services. We accept referrals based on who would benefit from our approach the most, and this typically means vulnerable people such as single parents and those suffering from ongoing mental illnesses. The ongoing service that we provide also means that there is always a risk of some members becoming overly dependent, and continuing to return for help even years after their immigration issues are sorted and they have become settled in the UK. It therefore becomes a difficult balance of maintaining a flexible support, while ensuring that our members truly learn how to adapt to their new environment. We are therefore constantly learning from our experiences.

Virtually anyone who leaves their home will find it difficult to step into an existing community, but migrants and refugees — those who need community support the most — face a particular struggle in finding it when they arrive in the UK. Migrants Organise supports migrants in building these vital networks to ensure they can face the difficulties that the state throws at them in safety, and surrounded by care and support. 

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