

## Interview with Diana Sterjovska from the Macedonian Community Welfare Association

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People who speak Macedonian make up the third largest language group of Disability Support Pension recipients under the age of 65 in the Western region of Melbourne, where a large proportion of the community resides. This indicates that the need for disability support services is likely to be high in this community. I recently caught up with Diana Sterjovska from the Macedonian Community Welfare Association (MCWA) to discuss the impact of the NDIS on their agency and to explore effective community engagement approaches.

MCWA provides social support groups, home care packages, a brokerage service, community development projects and support to help link clients to mainstream services through their Access and Support Program. This includes assisting clients to access and navigate the NDIS. MCWA is also an approved NDIS provider for home care and translations.

The agency has experienced a number of significant challenges in the transition to the NDIS. The biggest challenges include understanding the new system, difficulties using the provider portal and the complexity of the registration process for becoming a provider. Diana explains that the process has been confusing, time intensive and difficult, “there are no clear instructions about what we need to do.” According to Diana, even relatively simple questions such as, “who do we send the bills to?” are still unclear. She feels that smaller agencies such as those in the ethno-specific service sector require additional support, guidance and practical assistance to help them transition more effectively.

MCWA is interested in providing support coordination as there is a strong demand for language specific services in their community. Support coordination is designed to support participants to make the most of their NDIS funds. Participants work with support coordinators to determine how their funds will be spent and to connect with suitable providers.

Overall, MCWA’s clients, a largely ageing client population, have poor English proficiency and find it challenging to access and navigate mainstream services. Most have a strong desire for culturally and linguistically appropriate services, with a particular preference for services that respond to their cultural needs and customs. This is especially evident whenever the agency makes referrals to external providers and finds they become the “de facto case managers because clients come back to us.” This also applies to clients who are receiving NDIS services. “We’re finding that our existing clients whom we’ve assisted to transition to the NDIS are still contacting us even though they may have a support coordinator from a mainstream service.”

Disability is largely hidden in the Macedonian community due to stigma and cultural issues. According to Diana, “people do not generally seek help directly, rather they present to a service due to an issue that may be related to the disability.” She highlights an example involving a family with an adult son with a disability: “they came to us because the bank required a signature from their son...up until that point, they had been signing on his behalf. The bank queried consent and the family needed advocacy help sort out the issue.” Unless families are facing a specific dilemma or crisis, they will generally not present to a service seeking help in relation to disability.

Considering the many cultural and linguistic barriers to service access, how should information be communicated to the Macedonian community about the NDIS and available services? According to Diana, “the only entry door I can see for this target group is Centrelink...radio can be successful, but whatever comes from Centrelink, they’re reading it and paying attention.” Other ideas include the

provision of mentoring and cultural briefings to mainstream services to increase their understanding about effective communication options.

I asked Diana what final advice she would give to mainstream NDIS disability providers that are seeking to engage with the Macedonian community. For Diana, the answer is simple, “talk to us...we are experts in working with communities and can offer a lot. We act as a bridge to the community.”

Diana Sterjovska is the CEO of MWCA. For further information about MWCA or to contact Diana go to <http://www.mcwa.org.au/>

For contact details on Macedonian groups, clubs, media and associations, go to <http://www.darebin.org/Directory/SubCategoryList.aspx?S2Key=43>