



## **Birmingham Justice and Advocacy Centre- Building community resilience**

Birmingham Justice and Advocacy Centre is a volunteer-led non-profit organisation based in Birmingham. The organisation was founded in January 2008 with the aim to deliver advocacy, advice, information and guidance on behalf of the Birmingham residents as a whole, paying particular attention to those disadvantaged groups with recent immigration and settlement history in United Kingdom.

Our mission is to promote and raise awareness of the human and civil rights entitlements among the individuals and campaign for their enforcement and protection among the public and private bodies in their daily life relationship with the communities.

The aim is to bring through our activities blocks to build up and to preserve more cohesive and fairer British society.

Currently we don't have paid staff; we have 3 Management Committee members (1 female and 2 male) and 12 volunteers.

Our client group is all Birmingham residents, though mainly residents of East African origin. We help people by supplying advice, guidance and information. Our approach is to build up client's confidence to resolve to manage by themselves daily life issues. In many case we directly help clients by making telephone calls, drafting letters, negotiation with services suppliers, presenting appeals / reviews. We also signpost or refer to other organisations (such us Refugee Council, Trading Standards, Consumer Direct, CAB, Law Centres, IAS, ACAS, Local neighbourhood offices).

### **Briefly describe the experience you wish to focus on in this paper**

We want to focus on how we recruited skilled and enthusiastic volunteers, which we think have made our community organisation more strong and resilient. Specifically we have worked to increase the involvement of skilled refugees-migrants in unemployment status or employed in under qualified positions, thus eager to build up self-esteem, confidence and experience in UK.

### **Describe what your RCO did, and what came out of this**

We found word of mouth to be best form of recruiting volunteers. We would like to share with you some successful volunteering pathways, the first of which is reported in this paper below.

The case regards Mohammed, a 35 years old Eritrean refugee. He came in UK in 2007 as asylum seeker with degree in medicine and surgery. Once he obtained

refugee status, he started to get through the professional qualification process. He enrolled and successfully finished the "Pre-adaptation Programme for Refugee and migrant Healthcare Professionals" at Birmingham City University. He started to volunteer with us to run a project on NHS Choices and generic health information as well as healthy lifestyle information.

Mohammed was experiencing frustration of being unemployed in spite of his potential employability and earnings. He is a polyglot, speaking fluently Tigrigna, his own mother tongue, Amharic, Arabic and Italian. He used to spend his time between the local library and coffee shops. He came across our organisation through word of mouth and asked us to give him chance to volunteer to help the organisation to reach out Eritrean/Ethiopian community as well as Sudanese community as he speaks Arabic fluently. We asked him what sort of volunteer service he was willing to offer our organisation. As a doctor still waiting the licence he was not able to advise on medical issues, but he suggested he may give qualified information on NHS Choices information available on NHS website, transferred that information into understandable language for our customers. He also suggested drafting a project on Healthy Life Style on diet and physical activities on behalf of our clients. We made some enquiries and checks and gave him green light to create and run his own project under our supervision. He brought to our organisation new insight and energy to improve and strengthen services for our organisation as well as our clients.

Volunteering with us helped him to regain self-esteem, confidence; access to resources (computer, printing, telephone facilities to continue job hunting). While he was volunteering with us, Mohammed was trying to get the registration with the General Medical Council. It has been a long and discouraging process, but he eventually obtained a provisional registration, which means he can't work for his own as a doctor but he needs to work under supervision for one year. He had different interviews, mostly with unsuccessful outcome because of lack of full registration. Ultimately, he found a trainee paid position in Blackpool. He continues to volunteer with us on weekends, dispensing outreach healthy lifestyle information activities among East African communities in Birmingham.

### **What problems and barriers did your RCO face in doing this, and how did you overcome or try to overcome these?**

At first it was difficult to involve parents who look after the house and children as volunteers, as many of them do not see the immediate benefits of volunteering and giving time and energy for free.

We addressed this as follows:

- A member of our management committee agreed to organise a "civic awareness sessions" on Friday afternoons in our offices, inviting our service users, other RCO' and other individuals to discuss the rights and responsibilities related to the life in UK. Ranges of issues were dealt, from education and parenting responsibilities, health, employment, policing civil and criminal litigations. The open discussion evidenced that members of the new communities were reluctant to engage volunteering activities because of lack of understandable information as well as lack of time management skills
- The management committee decided to start campaign to emphasise volunteering benefits among clients and other community members

- We agreed to help clients to prepare a "Time Sheet" to find out their available time to dedicate volunteering activities; to help to draft CVs as well as collecting area of interest to draw volunteering pathways.

We have found that it is really beneficial for our organisation to have more service users actively involved. They have brought a lot of new resources ideas for projects, such as the Birmingham Justice and Advocacy Centre's Female Genital Mutilation Campaign Awareness, which intends to tackle this inhuman practice among Eastern African communities, the Human Rights and Citizenship Awareness project, which we have addressed the information need on the UK Human Rights Act and basic information about rights and responsibilities connected of being UK resident. We have developed the healthy lifestyle project, created and run by one of our volunteers.

**If your RCO accessed any support to help you with this area of work, describe this support and whether it was helpful to your organisation**

Our local Basis Project Organisational Development Office, Mr David Hirst, has been very helpful being available and resourceful whenever we requested his assistance. He suggested to us to develop a strategic plan, which would be very useful in looking at the longer term plans of the organisation. He assisted us in improving our capacity building as well as networking and fundraising.

We downloaded the Basis Project Governance Toolkit from the internet and used this to help develop Management Committee roles and responsibilities etc.

**What are your tips for other RCOs considering doing something similar?**

- Be ready and equipped to listen and understand to all members of the community!
- Back up your general and standard services with tailored and personalised services for groups/ individuals with special needs.
- Follow up and ask feedback for referrals to ascertain client enquiry outcome and to take, if necessary, further actions.
- Recruit motivated volunteers, be fair with them, let them to develop their skills and capacity creating for your volunteers networking, training and further qualification opportunities.
- Cultivate good relations with other RCO, local community organisations, Local Authorities and other stake holders.
- Be frugal with your financial resources; don't rely always on funding / grants resources to cover your running costs.

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