

"Restoring Dignity: issues in Mental Health and well-being for BAMER communities" Conference

28 November 2016

Workshop 1: Refugee-led wellbeing projects and their impact on health and mental wellbeing – *notes*

Speaker: Laurie Lijnders, Project Manager, ROTA

Actives Lives, Healthy Minds (ALHM) is a mental health and wellbeing project implemented in West London focusing on the Nepalese, Somali and Tamil communities. ROTA works on ALHM in partnership with Tamil Community Centre (TCC), Ilay Somali Community organization and Account Trust Nepalese Association who all specialise in the provision of services to BAMER communities including for example creating social opportunities to mitigate issues of isolation, depression, racism and discrimination, family breakdown and a lack of family support and structure. The project aims to improve mental health and wellbeing of members of the refugee and migrant community groups. ROTA also supports community groups and members to increase participation in the development and implementation of relevant mental health and health services locally and nationally. ROTA assists community groups in developing activities to support the mental health and wellbeing in a holistic, culturally sensitive and non-stigmatising way. All community groups are based in West London, which allows us to collectively influence policy around mental health and advocate for culturally sensitive mental health services in the area. ROTA is actively exploring the potential of including other refugee-led community groups in similar position. We started discussions with an Eritrean community organisation.

ALHM follows on from a previous three year ROTA project called "Healthy Mobilised and BAME" which worked from a baseline whereby service users were engaged and made aware of mental health issues. The positive outcomes from Healthy Mobilised and BAME and the lessons learnt and tools developed formed the basis of ALHM.

The workshop looks at how wellbeing projects have the power to improve health and mental health in refugee communities while providing a non-stigmatising, relaxing environment where people interact and socialise.

Tamil Community Centre

The Tamil Community Centre is a service user led community organisation that aims to meet the needs of a wide spectrum of the Tamil Community. The TCC currently runs English classes, drop-in service for dealing with practical problems (e.g. filling in forms etc), domestic violence counselling and support, and as is the focus of the workshop a Folk dance classes. In a video, the Tamil Community Centre shared how this physical activity positively influences their lives.

Ilays – Somali Community Centre

Speakers: Hassan Hussein, coordinator Ilays and Khadra Dira, community outreach worker, Ilays

Ilays was established in April 2004 to help socially marginalised and disadvantaged BME refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrant communities in West London. The majority of service-users are refugees and asylum seekers Somalia and other East African countries. Ilays offers holistic, culturally appropriate assistance that is non-stigmatising. Ilays offers the following services: Employment Support, Training and Mentoring, Mental Health/Health promotion and support, Youth development, Advice and Guidance (Form Filling), Translation and Interpretation, Drop-in , Family Support, Community development, English language classes, Research and Assessments, and Promoting Culture.

In the Somali community there is a common belief that mental illnesses are caused by supernatural events and therefore people often seek religious/traditional methods of healing. As there is a taboo, mental health sufferers are often stigmatised and excluded and hence many prefer to hide their condition rather than seek help for it. People are also concerned about other consequences of admitting mental health support needs. People with children are anxious about their children being taken into public care while those without children, are concerned about the impact on their prospects, for example, they fear it may limit their access to employability, driving license or in general negatively impact on their future.

Somali women in the UK

For most Somali women who arrive in the UK, family structures change leaving many of them to bring up children on their own and under a lot of stress. Somali women often feel uncomfortable to speak up about stress or mental illness for fear of stigma and other consequences such as losing their children or being considered an 'unfit parent'. It is therefore important to create a suitable context to engage Somali women

Ilays offers community-based support for those affected by mental health. The organisation offers a safe space where there is trust. Speaking the communities languages is essential to create trust and understanding. The approach taken by Ilays includes emotional support – listening to worries and stories:

- Socialising for isolated people.
- intervention and awareness-raising through mosques to reach out to more of the community
- Encourage GPs to make referrals to projects such as Ilays; see community groups as a resource

- Need for more targeted mental health support / training in the community
- Education program regarding those who believe in jinn

Challenges Setting up Women's Only Swimming

Ilays is in the process of organising women's only swimming sessions, with the aim of creating a non-stigmatising, relaxed environment to bring women together, in a positive and fun atmosphere where they can support each other.

Part of the challenge was the LA not being able to guarantee a female lifeguard. This led to the exclusion of a whole group of women from attending sessions, and was challenged under the Equalities Act.

- As a service commissioned by the council of Hounslow, provisions need to be compliant with the Public Sector Equality duty.

So we asked how the council have been given due regard to the need to:

- ✓ Not to indirectly discriminate against any of the protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010.
- ✓ Advance equality of opportunity for those who fall under these protected characteristics in this case gender, race and ethnicity, and religion or belief.

Response:

- Although aware of the crucial need to have female only lifeguards, unsuccessful in effort to train lifeguards for free across Hounslow
- Our objective is to deliver high quality sport, health and wellbeing services that are accessible to all without stigma. In particular we overcome barriers to participation, including age, culture, disability, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic conditions.
- Invitation to meet in partnership with Hounslow to work together to see how we can overcome these barriers.

Final thoughts

- With increasing cuts, refugee community-led groups should be seen as a resource for meeting needs faced by members of their community
- Culturally based, non-stigmatising, and holistic services at a local community space that is known and trusted
- Local languages
- Opportunity for early intervention
- Deliverable with the help of trained and supported community volunteers