



**The Hon Brendan O'Connor MP**  
Minister for Employment Participation

Ms Sharon Bird MP  
Member for Cunningham  
PO Box 387  
WOLLONGONG NSW 2520

Dear Ms Bird *Sharon,*

Thank you for your letter of 12 December 2008 concerning the petition collected by representatives of the Strategic Community Support to Refugee Families (SCARF) organisation. I apologise for the delay in responding.

I appreciate the effort that SCARF members have taken to organise and forward this petition in support of people from refugee backgrounds in the Wollongong area. Refugee entrants face unique challenges and it is important that their settlement into the Australian community is supported through access to training and job opportunities.

Refugee entrants are fully eligible for Australian Government employment services to help them undertake training and find jobs. This eligibility applies from the individual's arrival in Australia, including while their immediate settlement and any English language training needs are being met through programs administered by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Assessment and referral to employment services occurs through Centrelink, or refugee entrants may choose to register directly with a local Job Network member who will arrange for assessment and further referral as may be appropriate to the individual's needs.

While the existing employment services are able to assist refugees, from 1 July 2009 new services will be introduced to provide better more tailored assistance to disadvantaged job seekers and place greater emphasis on helping employers to fill job vacancies. Employment services providers will be required to work cooperatively with Centrelink, local community and government organisations, training providers and employers to address the needs of disadvantaged job seekers. The new services also include an emphasis on the delivery of effective assistance for refugees and other job seekers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The petitioners' request that action is taken to introduce financial incentives for employers in the Wollongong area to provide greater training and job opportunities for people from refugee backgrounds. As part of the new employment services, providers will have access to an Employment Pathway Fund (EPF) that can be used to purchase training and other assistance as appropriate to the individual job seeker's needs. The EPF can also be used to provide wage subsidy support to employers who offer disadvantaged job seekers sustainable employment opportunities. Details of the new employment services, including the EPF, may be found at [www.workplace.gov.au/ESpurchasing](http://www.workplace.gov.au/ESpurchasing).

I suggest that a SCARF representative may wish to speak with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to discuss the specific needs of the refugee community in the Wollongong area and facilitate liaison with local employment services providers as may be appropriate. Mr Derek Pigram from the Department's National Office on (02) 6121 6453 would be pleased to assist in this way.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. If you require further information, please contact my Adviser, Mr Tallis Richmond on 0407 509 142.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brendan O'Connor', written in a cursive style.

**Brendan O'Connor**

**29 JAN 2009**