

Speech to Federal Parliament - Sharon Bird

3 November 2005

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Cunningham Electorate: Strategic Community Assistance to Refugee Families Speech

"Last Saturday I had the great pleasure of launching an initiative of some very dedicated local people aimed at providing practical assistance to newly settled refugees in our area from the African countries. This group has been named SCARF, which stands for Strategic Community Assistance to Refugee Families, and was established in March this year. Firstly, I would like to extend my sincere congratulations to Sharyn MacKenzie, Jane Coburn and their team of volunteers. These local people saw another group in the community facing real problems and decided to try and find a solution, a way in which local people could help each other.

SCARF is offering mentoring programs where local families support newly settled refugee families in the challenges of navigating a new society which is unfamiliar and where another language is spoken. These mentors familiarise the adults with such important processes as simply doing the shopping, dealing with Centrelink and schools, looking for employment or training, and various daily activities that can be a bit bewildering if you are in an unfamiliar society. I also commend SCARF for the focus they have put on providing assistance to the children of these families. Local volunteers run homework help sessions for high-school students and home tutoring for primary school students.

I made the point at the official launch on Saturday that communities are strengthened when we take action to make sure that all people can find a role and a purpose in their community. It is not enough to simply be tolerant and inclusive. We also need to take meaningful, practical action to ensure that people are not marginalised or denied full and active participation in workplaces, schools, education courses and of course the broader community. Building links through families is one of the oldest and most effective ways of achieving this highly desired result.

Local volunteers have indicated to me that the families being settled into our area from African nations require a quite unprecedented level of support, as they are a very disparate group who may be arriving from the same continent but have originated from different countries with often very different languages, cultural backgrounds and life experiences from each other, let alone from the new community into which they settle. This makes it difficult to establish the standard group links that former waves of refugees were able to achieve with each other, as they shared a common language and culture.

The nature of this challenge means the government's settlement programs that are modelled on a one-size-fits-all approach, which may have been appropriate in the past, regularly fail to achieve the intended outcomes with such groups. In particular, careful, considerate assessment on arrival of literacy levels and problems needs to be done for many of the children. They have had very limited, if any, schooling experience, and the problems of beginning a new school with English as a second language are exacerbated by this". (Time expired)