

Refugee Services Aotearoa, Annual General Meeting

Report from Chief Executive Heather Hayden

15 December 2010

TENA KOTOU TENA KOTOU TENA KOUTOU KATOA

It is my pleasure to be able to report back to you, members and other interested friends of Refugee Services Aotearoa, on the past year.

It has been a very busy and challenging one, made all the more difficult by the pressures that come with an international economic down turn.

We started the year facing a huge deficit and finished with a small surplus – very necessary because we had no reserves – the cupboards were bare, as the Nursery Rhyme goes. The fact that we did it without any impact on our work is a testament to the very hard work and sacrifices of all our staff.

I would like to first report on the past year and then highlight what we are planning for the next year.

There have been some significant changes since I last stood before you – and there had to be.

You may know of Jim Collin's book, Good to Great. He has also written one for organisations such as ours - Good to Great and the Social Sectors. In it he has a quote I often think about.

"In my work with non-profits, I find that they're in desperate need of greater discipline – disciplined planning, disciplined people, disciplined governance and disciplined allocation of resources."

At the last AGM, in October 2009, the Chairman and I highlighted the many difficulties Refugee Services was facing.

In this last year we have set about addressing these problems by taking a **disciplined approach** to each of these areas.

Disciplined governance. Last AGM you voted in a very strong and experienced Board. They have co-opted on two other Board members to support Maori engagement and financial management. As the Chairman has noted, there is now a very good separation of governance and management.

The Board has met monthly throughout the year and has taken an active interest in the work of the organisation. They have also had to take some tough decisions, as we sought to turn around our financial position.

The first of these was at the end of last year when we restructured the organisation at the **management** level. This was in part to close the gap between our income and expenditure and partly to provide me with a management team who could help take Refugee Services into a new era of service delivery and accountability.

The restructure sought to flatten the layers of management, protect front-line services and strengthen both the operational and compliance decision-making processes.

I am pleased to report that we now have very good management processes and have training underway to grow a high-performing management team able to take on the challenges we face in the not-for-profit sector.

We have also sought to ensure we have the right amount of **discipline in our systems**. That has meant reviewing and changing HR processes and introducing a new database to capture the information we need to both inform decision-making and to report back accurately to our funders. In 2011 we are planning to introduce results-based accountability measures into our reporting processes.

Our focus on a **disciplined use of resources** has meant we started costing each of our services. We now know what it costs to run the various parts of our work, and we are better able to report on this to our major funders. We are now using this information to plan for the best use of resources in each of our settlement areas.

It is challenging in an organisation that is thinly spread across a number of resettlement areas – how do we keep our overheads down and yet ensure staff are well supported? How do we keep enough flexibility into our staffing to manage the impacts of such disasters as the Christchurch earthquake?

We do this through our more **disciplined planning processes**. Earlier this year the Board and management team met over two occasions, to focus on our strategic direction for the next few years. Out of that planning came a Strategic Direction that has 6 key areas of focus:

- Outcomes focused
- Refugee-centred approach
- Longer and broader engagement in the sector
- Lead agency accountability
- Evidence based service delivery
- Capability and capacity enhancement.

We had undertaken to consult on these within the refugee community and sector over the past three months, but have postponed this until the government has completed work on the NZ Refugee Resettlement Strategy, to which the Chairman has referred.

We expect to continue our consultation in the first few months of next year and will come back to members with a strategic document which will guide our work for the next 3 years.

While all these necessary changes have been occurring, our staff have continued to deliver services to all quota refugees for the first year of settlement, and because of the high and complex needs of many of them, we are still working with many clients well into their second year in New Zealand.

Our role is wide ranging – and often misunderstood. Defining our roles and responsibilities (with funders and with clients) will be one of our key tasks for next year. For example do we have a mandate (or funding) to provide houses? It's assumed we do, but in fact we don't. However, if something goes wrong with a house, then we are called to account by other agencies and by our clients.

We need better definition of roles and responsibilities so that we are able to focus on our work and be accountable for that which is ours to undertake.

Over the last year we have successfully piloted a new work stream. With funding from a large corporate donor we have been able to employ a caseworker as a pilot here in Wellington. The caseworker is a former refugee, working across ethnicities (so different from our cross cultural workers) and supporting our social work and settlement service.

The pilot has been so successful we have funding to employ two in this financial year and plan to seek funding to have at least one in every office within the next two years.

With funding from the Community Response Fund we were able to increase social work hours and employ our first social work intern (again a former refugee) in Auckland.

We have also put a greater emphasis on supporting our volunteers and now have dedicated volunteer supervisors in each of our locations. Our volunteers are essential to the work we do and we will be looking at ways in which we can develop the volunteer programme, strengthen their support and generally help make it a more rewarding experience.

We have also been seeking a closer relationship with our former refugee communities and are very pleased to be close to signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Refugee Network. We are seeking closer ties and strategic alliances with other organisations and expect to be able to complete these in the new year.

I said at the beginning it had been a challenging year, but that we felt satisfied that we had delivered to our clients, funders and members. We are working to build a stronger foundation, more secure lines of funding and become a provider of first choice to government.

I think it is important to point out that of our \$3.7million budget for 2009/2010, \$1million of this income came from contestable funding. That's over a quarter of our budget. Receiving this made all the difference to our results.

It is the same this year, and if our applications are not successful, we don't have reserves to fall back on. And this isn't to do extra activities. The contestable funding is needed to ensure we can deliver to our major government funders the activities and interventions we are contracted to provide. In other words, we rely heavily on voluntary support, donations and other contestable funding to carry out the work government agencies contract from Refugee Services.

All this makes planning precarious, and we have been costing the services we provide to ensure greater transparency and provide options for service delivery within the baseline funding we are provided.

In the last few months we have also been hugely affected by the earthquake in Christchurch. We won't be able to settle many refugees into Christchurch for the next year (at least not the 100-120 we usually do each year), and this will mean greater numbers going into our other areas. Our refugee clients in Christchurch have been hugely impacted by the quake, and they will require greater support over a longer period of time.

Now for the next year. Key areas for the next year will be a continued focus on ensuring we are delivery the best possible service to our clients. There is still some work to do in a number of areas, but we are on a much more stable foundation.

- We have a number of projects under way, particularly in the employment and housing areas.
- We have just employed a community development worker in Palmerston North.
- We will be seeking additional funding to have a caseworker in each of our offices.
- We want to enhance our volunteer programme.
- We will be working to align our services delivery to the outcomes in the NZ Refugee Resettlement Strategy.
- And finally, we are sharpening our risk management, reporting and other accountability systems.

I want to finish with special thanks to a number of our funders.

- Department of Labour
- Ministry of Social Development
- Lotteries Grant – for our caseworkers

- BAT for funding the pilot of our caseworker
- Lee Foundation – for providing 6 cars for our social workers in Auckland and Wellington
- And numerous individuals, churches and schools.

We all work together to provide the best possible start to life in NZ for those who have had to flee their native countries, and come, without choice, to live in another country, far away from their homes.