Arabic Client Service Officer (ACSO)

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Specialised cultural client service officers are increasingly in demand, with many government agencies adopting such roles within their departments. The Department of Corrective Services currently has a range of culturally specific client officers catering to various communities. These include the Aboriginal, Vietnamese, Pacific Islander and Arabic speaking community. A Cultural specific client service officer is appointed according to the demographics and growing trends of the population been served. Community needs dictates the culturally specialised officer required.

Officers within the Department of Corrective Services manage offenders from a wide range of backgrounds in the custodial and community environment. Case management remains the fundamental tool to reduce recidivism. When working with offenders, a holistic approach must be considered which would encompass the cultural background of the offender. Culture adds layers of insight into an offender’s values, core beliefs, thought process and interactions. At times culture can be at the root of communication challenges. These specialised officers act as a source of information for supervising officers, who can be called upon to assist and shed light on what at times can be an unknown world decorated with traditions, customs and accepted practices.

In 2005 the Department of Corrective Services identified the need for an Arabic Client Service Officer (ACSO) to be established within the Bankstown and Parramatta areas to effectively and proactively work with offenders from an Arabic speaking background. The four primary objectives for the role include:

ACSO’S Primary Objectives

- Supporting and assisting the probation and parole officers in the case management of offender in a culturally sensitive manner.
- Participate in the case management of offenders of an Arabic speaking cultural background to ensure appropriate case plans and supervision is implemented consistent with the Department of Corrective Services mission of reduction of re-offending. Liaise and consult with correctional staff for pre and post release planning for Offenders of an Arabic speaking background.
- Identify and build collaborative community networks and partnerships to improve the effectiveness of community based offender programs in District offices.
- Act as a resource for District Managers and Policy and Programs Unit to develop effective service-wide culturally appropriate offender programs.

ACSO’S Core Responsibility

The core responsibility of the ACSO incorporates a holistic approach in assisting offender and officers in the Department of Corrective Services. The role is not limited but rather looks at the bigger picture of the offender. This is achieved by examining all factors relating to the offender such as the offender’s family, community and service providers.

The Core responsibilities have three key functional areas to practically assist officers in the Department of Corrective Service working with offender from an Arabic speaking background. The three core responsibilities are:

- Liaison and advice
- Communication
- Case Management

Liaison and Advice

The role of ACSO is to provide expert advice and guidance to supervising officers in both the community and Parole Units in the scope of culturally appropriate interventions for Arabic speaking offenders. This is
accomplished by preparing strategies to deal with offenders in a culturally sensitive manner. Having case plans targeting an offender’s criminogenic factors whilst applying cultural understanding allows for smooth and effective service delivery.

As culture is dynamic and unique to individual experience, identifying an offender's cultural conviction requires a series of in-depth interviews. This includes interviews with offenders and their families. Firstly the offender is interviewed and asked questions in relation to family background, upbringing and relationships with both nuclear and extended family. This is explored with the offender to ascertain their role within the family unit. Secondly contact is made with the offender’s family or any significant person. Conversing with family about the offender is crucial for the verification process. Maintaining regular contact with families is essential as they have “free” access to the offenders. Family see the offenders in their home environment and at times without their defensive mode. With this in mind, the family can at times provide insight into the offender’s personality, behaviour and pinpoint changes or deterioration in circumstances. After contact is made with the offender and their family, the ACSO is able to determine an offender's cultural conviction. This will then be implemented into the case management strategy to produce a culturally appropriate case plan.

Communication
For the ACSO role to be effective it must develop, establish and maintain effective communication with all three key parties of the case plan which includes the offender, supervising officer and service providers. The information relayed must be accurate and transparent to retain a healthy working relationship with all parties.

Building rapport with offenders ensures a high level of offender management service is provided to offenders of an Arabic cultural background. At the initial stages the ACSO role is explained to the offender, promoting the services’ mission to reduce re-offending. To further promote a transparent working relationship, the legal obligation of the ACSO is explained to the offender. Once this transparency has been established, offenders will feel they are aware and informed about the decision making process and goals of the case management plan.

The ACSO works with the supervising officer to break cultural barriers through education. The training component of the role has increased dramatically. The ACSO provides training to new recruits entering the Department of Corrective Services about cultural awareness and working with offenders from an Arabic speaking background.

The ACSO role requires networking with the Arabic speaking community to market the functions and aims of the Department of Corrective Services. The ACSO builds a positive image within the Arabic speaking community and is proactive in airing the issues offenders encounter. This provides the Arabic speaking community with an increased awareness of issues facing disadvantaged members of the community such as the offenders and their families. Communities with this knowledge are able to provide services to assist the offenders with integration.

Case Management
The ACSO role participates and conducts interviews with the offenders and their families. This is to gather relevant and factual information to assist with case planning. The ACSO works closely with the supervising officer to provide advice on the development of an offender’s case plan to identify goals and means to achieve this. The ACSO’s involvement targets the cultural side of the case management plan thus providing strategies to enable the offender to successfully integrate into the community and complete their relevant orders.

Challenges
The role to date has many challenges and hurdles to jump. The first challenge faced, began when the ACSO was first introduced into the office. Colleagues were unsure of how to use the role in managing Arabic
The offenders on the other hand embrace the role and are able to differentiate between the ACSO acting as a liaison and the supervising officer instructing and directing. Offenders can identify with the cultural link and the ACSO does not use the role to give direction or change the case plan. The ACSO works within the guidelines maintaining the boundaries role’s responsibility.

At Present
From my personal account whilst working as the first ACSO I have found the position to have changed directions. In the early stages the role was utilised for the networking and building partnership component. This was achieved by my being an active member in the circle of interagency meetings within the local area. As the ACSO I attend periodic meetings with both government and non-government agencies. This provides a forum to voice the obstacles offenders encounter with integrating back into the community. The success of raising awareness amongst the Arabic speaking community has bridged gaps. The Arabic speaking community has established programs directly targeting offending behaviour such as an Anger Management program and Drug and Alcohol support groups.

The case management side of the role remains an unchartered territory for both the supervising officer and unit leaders. Although the Area Manager regularly promotes the importance of the ACSO role, in particular making direct contact with offenders, however, at times the case management purpose or impact of cultural link is not clearly comprehended as such the role continues to grow at Bankstown District Office.

The case management component is an evolving process and has the potential to relieve a supervising officer’s workload. My role as the ACSO has been designed to support the supervising officer. This has been reinforced with the statement of duties outlining access in all areas of case management. This role is highlighted as an additional case management tool. The ACSO is not limited and is to provide support in interviews, referrals, verification and family contact. To date there has been some confusion and only time and experience will rectify this issue.

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