

FEATURE

A hand up, not a handout

Helping asylum seekers is a win-win situation, writes **Sue White**.

While the politicking around asylum seekers appears to have no end in sight, one non-profit organisation has outlasted the current debate.

For 20 years, the Asylum Seekers Centre in inner Sydney has helped asylum seekers in the area with issues ranging from healthcare to homelessness.

Every day, people from up to 45 countries visit the Surry Hills centre for a hot lunch, English lessons or medical appointments. They also access the job support provided by the employment assistance program.

"We believe helping people with employment is a vital part of what we do," the centre's chief executive, Melanie Noden, says. "It's important to assist clients to transition into a new life, and part of that is trying to access employment so they can contribute to their new community and give something back."

The approach keeps the centre's 10 paid staff and 160 volunteers busy year round. Up to 450 people, many of whom arrived in Australia on boats, used the centre's services in the past 12 months.

"Our clients are asylum seekers who are on bridging visas or about to go onto one," Noden says.

"Ninety per cent of our clients can't access government support."

She sees work as a key part of identity. "It's similar for all of us - working is a large part of your life. These are people who have always worked hard, and want to be independent. They often come from countries where there's no such thing as charity or support, so as a matter of pride they want to work."



Myth busted ... restaurant owner Pauline Nguyen says asylum seekers are hard workers. Photo: Sahlan Hayes

Job advisers support people through tasks such as preparing resumés, researching work opportunities and practising interviews. Once a job is secured, transitional support for employees and employers helps through the first few months of a placement.

"Without assistance, it's quite difficult for asylum seekers to get work - they have no local experience or contacts," Noden says. "We work with employers to educate them about what bridging visas mean. We show them how to check that working rights are ongoing, and provide support for both parties."

A microloans program to help resolve barriers to entry has also been successful.

"Sometimes the barrier to going

to a job may be they can't afford the work boots or the uniform," she says. "We provide microloans of up to \$1200 for these purposes."

For at least one local employer, Pauline Nguyen of the Red Lantern restaurants in Surry Hills and Darlinghurst, the difficulties faced by asylum seekers are a familiar story - her family were Vietnamese boat people. "I'm a refugee myself," she says. "When we came to Australia, I watched my parents work hard - they had no choice. Those opportunities led to social status, contribution, growth and being a part of something."

While Nguyen prefers not to dwell on the politics, she points out that one of the many misconceptions people have about refugees is that

they don't want to work. "These are people who aren't going to let you down, who will always turn up for work - we employ refugees here, and the myth that they are unreliable and don't care is just that, a myth. They come to work early, ask questions and want to learn - they want to be here and do well."

Nguyen says there is an untapped pool of labour employers are missing out on by overlooking this group, but says her involvement in the centre's employment program goes beyond business or politics.

"Of course people must understand there may be a bit of a cultural or language barrier," she says. "But we're here to share experiences and help people. It's not a political issue, it comes down to humanity."