

## Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration in Melbourne's outer north:

# Case for Continued Federal Government Investment

## Proposal Summary

### **Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC)**

seeks continued Federal Government funding to sustain and scale its successful Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program across the fast-growing outer northern metropolitan region of Melbourne, particularly the LGAs of Hume and Whittlesea.

This area has traditionally had much poorer unemployment than Greater Melbourne with more complex labour market participation issues and is also home to almost 30% of Victoria's refugee population (Victorian Refugee Health Network Data report 2025).

As Australia seeks to address its labour shortages and boost productivity growth, programs like EPRI are critical. WCC's place based EPRI model provides accessible, integrated and tailored support to refugees in Australia with low skills and/or low English who are experiencing significant and intersecting barriers to employment. EPRI builds confidence, skills and pathways to economic participation.

Our EPRI program has achieved significant short and medium term outcomes for more than 500 humanitarian entrants with low skills and/or low English across Hume and Whittlesea. The program is achieving its intended outcomes with 95% participants increasing skills, confidence and English language skills related to economic participation and 58% of participants increasing their economic participation through paid placements, employment and self-employment.

EPRI outcomes have been achieved through a range of engagement and support strategies and partnerships with regional training and education institutions, settlement providers, employment services, employers and industry bodies. EPRI is a critical connector between all these providers to ensure some of those farthest from the labour market get the targeted support they need to secure and retain employment.

WCC's EPRI model creates flexible building blocks (eg. training, volunteering, paid placements) that can be combined and tailored to meet individual learning, employability and settlement needs. Rather than assigning participants to predetermined pathways according to language proficiency or skill level, experiences are curated based on people's real aspirations and readiness for different forms of employment and community engagement. This allows for personalized progress while still working toward shared outcomes like employment readiness and social integration.

**This proposal will support  
1,120 refugees  
with low skill and/or low English  
over 3 years from July 2026.**

# Evidence of Impact

Long-term outcomes and avoided cost or comparative cost modelling for EPRI is not available as the program is in pilot phase. An early independent evaluation funded by Department of Home Affairs (Where To Consulting, 2024) found EPRI models that appeared more effective included support for employers, had strong connections to the settlement sector to support recruitment, were flexible in supporting variation in participant need, had a focus on career planning and emotional support, and included wages for participants. WCC's EPRI model has all these features and has demonstrated consistent and promising results.

WCC's data collection reinforces these outcomes.

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I learnt about the nature of work in Australia and how the work laws operate, in addition to continuous encouragement and working on improving me through appropriate training. I was helped with creating my CV, completing a police check, tax return lodgment, obtaining work wear, as well as training on how to conduct job interviews and how to successfully pass them.”



PARTICIPANT

## Detailed participant interviews conducted in November 2025 indicate the following success factors:

Individually tailored responses that consider level of English, skills, work experience and other settlement needs

Employment support provided in combination with settlement and other support services

English language acquisition related to vocational outcomes through work experience

Employment mentoring that supports people to secure entry level employment while creating time and opportunity to develop higher levels of skill and knowledge for improved long-term outcomes.

Diverse participation opportunities including paid and student placements, training, further education and volunteering, which all provide valuable and practical work-place learning.

Greater preparation on the practicalities of Australian workplaces such as occupational health and safety, racism and discrimination

A gendered approach to ensure equity of outcomes for female humanitarian entrants. This includes programming that is flexible around caring responsibilities, supports independence through transport and promoting positive female role models.

# Value for money

Funding received to deliver EPRI for the period February 2023 to January 2026 is \$1,576,552. During this time we have worked with 500 participants – average \$3,150 per participant. More than 120 participants are in ongoing employment with another 85 in higher study or training. Others are volunteering and building language and digital skills.

We have not done a comparison directly with Workforce Australia as the intent of the programs are different, but EPRI is achieving a lot of secure and meaningful employment outcomes for participants indicating its effectiveness and value for money. One recent EPRI participant had been with a Workforce Australia provider for two years without securing a job and within two months with EPRI is now working in a full-time job.

Whittlesea Community Connections is committed to strengthening the evidence base for EPRI. Our Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework supports data collection on service usage, individual and partnership outcomes and social and economic indicators. With a further three year commitment we would engage with academic and sector experts to assess impact, inform continuous improvement and share learning. Additionally, we support working with other EPRI providers, peak bodies and Treasury to develop methodologies to calculate avoided costs in addition to providing strong evidence to influence broader employment services reform.

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When I became a volunteer, I benefited a lot from conversations with others whether Arabic or English speakers. My free time was filled with meaningful work... through volunteering, you meet people, expand your connections and grow. All of this happened through the EPRI program. It pushed me to integrate more, expand my knowledge and meet more people.”

“

Of course, my self-confidence has definitely increased. My language skills have improved, I can now search for a job, handle situations, and if I have any weakness in any skill, I try to develop it and work on it. And now I will gain local experience that [is] needed.”

“

They took time to understand about me and my culture, my language, and my religion, before starting any program and also about my timings, what I'm doing, everything they first of all, they took time.”

PARTICIPANTS, SHARED THE FOLLOWING ON THE IMPACT OF PARTICIPATING IN EPRI



# Funding Request

We seek funding to support the successful social and economic integration of 1,120 refugees with low skills and/or low English over three years.

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WCC started working with me to turn my hobby into a small business. It was a wonderful opportunity for which I am very grateful. The new business allows me to share a piece of my culture and create something special for others. It also provides a way for me to support my family and build a future here in Australia. It has been a life-changing experience for me. My dream and passion became a business, small but my own. The invaluable support and guidance from EPRI, provided the necessary push. It is an amazing opportunity to learn, grow, and build something meaningful.”

*(quote translated)*



PARTICIPANT

## This proposal will lead to an increase in:

English language acquisition, particularly English for industry

Skills and capacity to independently navigate the Australian job market

Confidence and skills in relation to language and communication, technology and digital literacy, computer skills and rights in relation to employment and common issues such as racism and discrimination in the workplace

Locally relevant vocational skills and experience

Alignment between overseas experience and skills with employment outcomes

Sustainable employment outcomes to avoid bouncing between insecure jobs or contracting

Employer capability and willingness to engage with, and practically support, EPRI job seekers

Funding Year	Amount	Participants
Year 1 (FY27)	\$1,140,000	300
Year 2 (FY28)	\$1,387,000	365
Year 3 (FY29)	\$1,729,000	455
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$4,256,000</b>	<b>1,120</b>

## Participants stories demonstrating how EPRI is creating economic pathways that align with participants skills, aspirations and motivation

### Dalia

Dalia is a 37 year old refugee from Syria who was a primary teacher, but her qualification is not recognised in Australia. Dalia, widowed soon after arriving in Australia, is a single mother with two children. Participating in EPRI enabled her to understand Australian workplaces, write her CV, improve her English, and learn interview skills. As part of the EPRI program, she attended a one-day training with VicRoads to become a volunteer mentor through WCC's youth driving program. After four months of volunteering and EPRI participation, we enrolled her in a Certificate IV in the Motor Vehicle Driver Training Course. Through volunteering she had seen how her teaching skills provided a strong foundation she could build on to become a driving instructor. In December 2024, Dalia opened her own driving school business. Throughout 2025 she provided driving lessons through driverED, WCC's social enterprise and built her own client base.



### Toha

Toha arrived in Australia from Syria in 2019 at the age of 55. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she pursued a Certificate III in Childcare. However, she faced challenges in finding employment in the childcare sector due to her limited English skills (Level 1). Through the EPRI program, Toha secured a placement and paid work with our WiW childcare enterprise. She was assigned shifts alongside experienced WiW workers who provided her with support and guidance, focusing on improving her English and helping her understand workplace culture. For the past two years, Toha has been one of our dedicated workers at WiW.



### Kobra

Kobra is a 28-year-old female who was born in Afghanistan and fled the warzone with her family. She arrived in Australia as a refugee in September 2024. By January 2025, Kobra was connected with the WCC EPRI team for assistance in finding employment. We encouraged her to continue her English classes at Melbourne Polytechnic, an AMEP provider. Our team supported Kobra in enrolling in a "Ready for Hospitality" course offered by WCC. We helped her complete the necessary enrolment forms, including a police check and a working with children check. She successfully completed the course and starting volunteering with us. We helped with her resume and job readiness and in August 2025 Kobra began working part-time at our Food Collective café and catering business. While she works, she will continue to receive support to help her integrate into her new role and will also get assistance in finding a full-time job when she is ready.



### Wisam

Wisam, a Chaldean refugee from Iraq, first connected with WCC for settlement support. Wisam faced challenges adapting to a new culture, navigating services, and learning English. Despite this, his optimism, empathy, and motivation to contribute were evident. With support from EPRI, Wisam began his pathway to employment and community participation by volunteering with WCC's Transport Team, assisting community members with barriers to essential services. Over two years, Wisam has become a valued member of the volunteer team and has done various casual roles building his skills further. His friendliness, reliability, and compassion make him a trusted presence for clients and staff... "Volunteering makes me feel part of Australia. I want to help others feel welcome and supported, just like I was."



# About



Whittlesea Community Connections is very well placed to further embed EPRI into and across the organization, partners and regional employment ecosystem.

WCC is a place-based community-led organisation, working to improve equity, justice and opportunity across Greater Melbourne's outer north. WCC delivers a range of services including financial and material assistance, legal help, community transport, settlement services for new arrivals, prevention of family violence initiatives, youth programs, volunteering and other opportunities for community participation and engagement. Through internal referral and support systems vulnerable jobseekers access the holistic support they need to address barriers to participation. This is where WCC adds significant value.

WCC have extensive experience with the EPRI cohort through our decades of delivering Settlement and Transition Support (SETS) and through the delivery of adult pre-accredited training (Learn Local), Jobs Victoria Employment Service (Multicultural Specialist), Jobs Victoria Mentoring Service, Priority Workforce Projects and more recently Parent Pathways. Our success is underpinned by strong regional partnerships with industry, education, health and government.

WCC also operates four social enterprises in different sectors providing key on the job training and placement opportunities:

- Women in Work mobile childcare
- DriverED multilingual driving school
- nugal biik plants and seeds wholesale nursery, and
- the Food Collective café, catering and wholesaling.

We have funding agreements in place with the Australian Government through:

- Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
- Department of Home Affairs
- Department of Health and Department of Social Services

and meet all their compliance and reporting requirements.

## Links

- [WCC website](#)
- [EPRI case studies, videos and evaluations](#)
- [Social Enterprise Australia EPRI information](#)

## Contact details for further information

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this budget proposal. We have kept this submission concise and would be pleased to provide further information upon request.

### For any enquiries, please contact:

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